



They're EVERYWHERE!

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- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Changelings
- Comedy
- Drama
- Random
- Violence
- Profanity

Description

Updates: Weekly, hopefully.

Don't think about this too much, it hurts the squishy sponge.

WOO, FEATURED! 18.1.2020

EDIT: Added a character cheat sheet in the bottom of this section due to requests.

The only thing that's known about changelings in general is that they came from the Badlands and that they eat love. Oh right, and that their queen is evil, cool, and certainly does *not* star in some of the wilder pony dreams.

Not much, is it?

The thing is, it's not as if they know too much themselves. For example, how many of them there really were? How many of them survived the invasion? How silly was it to attempt to disrupt princess Celestia's cake supply?

No one can fully answer such burning questions. Only one thing is for certain - they're now *everywhere*, and they all have their own stories to tell, some long, some short, some violent, some silly, some happy. Changelings all over the place.

Not every creature minds, though.

CHARACTER CHEAT SHEET:

--156,387--

156 - infiltrator, F, hive loyalist.

387 - warrior, M, knows strangely too much.

918 - infiltrator. F.

47989 - drone, hit head on rock, a bit confused

559, 791, 2899 - warriors, M

10013, 13887, 19441, 31214 - drones

--1988,9999--

1988 - infiltrator, M, in charge of the lumber camp lings, totally femboy looking.

9999 - currently the highest ranking drone in the hive, involuntary drone Jesus.

36658, 57999 - drone bark meister, drone bark padawan. Definitely not opiate dealers.

13415 - drone, second-in-command after 9999.

17070 - cooking drone, deaf.

20100 - moving pictures drone

54331, 74989, 33125, 65661 - drones

3x Silent

--1313--

1313 - infiltrator, M, breaks easily, is put together easily.

Zamira - F, Blueblood's zebra bodyguard

--65536--

65536 - drone, requires no details here.

Sharp Biscuit - Batpony, M, Nightguard Commander.

Beacon - Unicorn, M, paladin Grandmaster

Pink Sunset - Batpony, M

Gloom - Batpony, F

Night Hunter - Batpony, M

Steel Glimmer - Batpony, F

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156, 387: 1

In the middle of a nondescript forest, two changelings are staring at each other. Overall, they are both of the standard changeling mold - no tail, no mane, teal eyes, black carapace with slight dark green undertone. Neither of them even have a secondary belly plating. The smooth carapace and general figure of one, however, hints to it being a female infiltrator, currently blinking in shock with her jaw dropped.

“What?”

The other changeling’s carapace is more jagged and bulkier which, in addition to its deeper voice, reveal that it’s in fact a he and likely a warrior.

“What about which part? I mean, it’s difficult to misunderstand the phrase *“we’re screwed, oh holes we’re so screwed, holes help us we’re so unbelievably screwed”*, or am I wrong?”

“I mean the part before that where you said ‘she left’.”

“She said that the splitting headache she’s had for as long as she could recall was gone and that she was about to enjoy some peace and quiet. Now, before you ask, I have absolutely zero idea what she meant by that.”

“Damn it!” the infiltrator stomps the forest floor in frustration which only deepens as the soft ground gives in.

“Sooo, we synced on that *“we’re screwed and not in the good old feeding way”* part?” the warrior completely ignores her outburst, earning him a withering glare from the infiltrator.

“Alright, I came as quickly as I could when I heard the hive call. Who’s in charge here then?”

“I suppose it’s me, 387 here by the way, but in charge of *what* exactly? Hive knowledge has collapsed after the queen left, most of the drones here are

trying to hug grass because they think it's waving at them, 36658 there just successfully figured that bark isn't edible *after* stripping whatever that tree is down to a toothpick, and 47989 jumping up and down on his stomach thinks it's helping him purge."

Crack.

"Aaaand great! 47989 slipped, hit its head on a rock, and is now twitching on the ground in a rapidly expanding pool of goo," 387 rolls his eyes, "I'll go snap its neck so that it doesn't suffer."

The infiltrator sighs.

"You know what? No!"

"*You monster!*" gasps 387, "Though I can't deny that it's funny... in a morbid way. We're betting on how long it's gonna keep twitching then or-"

"That's *not* what I meant!" she facehoofs, "What I meant was that we've been dealing with this... nonsense for as long as all of us can remember and every time the solution was to "*get rid of the weak links*". Look where it got us? Get someone to bandage 47989's head and see if not bleeding out can help its situation."

"That's dumb."

"Rank 156 here. Dumb or not, you're doing it."

"Alright," 387 shrugs, "Now for the million-bit question - how does one make bandages?"

"Are you stu-" 156 scans her fragmented remains of the hive mind knowledge and blinks, "Oh dear..."

"Thought so," 387 nods, "Back to the neck snapping it is then."

"Can you warriors *not* think of bodily harm for one second? You know, try being constructive, maybe? Ponies can... build... forge... make bandages, who says we can't?"

“Literally the two of us a few seconds ago.”

“Just do it!”

“Still only a changeling warrior, not a changeling genie. Wishing on me won’t do squat. You, on the other hole, just sounded *waaaay* too much like Ch-”

“Don’t you dare end that sentence.”

“No problem. I could still end 47989’s suffering, though, if you wish vaguely enough.”

“I ordered you-”

“Aaand nevermind, it’s just stopped twitching on its own,” 387 calls out, “Well done, 47989. Your problem-solving initiative is commendable!”

“Goo, fill the fracture with goo.”

“A changeling solving a problem with goo. How *original*.”

“Get your lazy ass going or you’re next in line to help 36658 throw up! I’ll even arrange the boulders around you two myself.”

“Hey, 6689, goop up 47989’s head!”

“The hole was that? You outrank that drone ten times over.”

“Yes, and this is called delegation or, as our currently absentee queen would never admit is the right way of doing something, finding the right tool for the job.”

“In what reality do you think *a drone* can do a better job than a three-digit warrior?!”

“6689, don’t just glob it all over 47989, imagine he’s a tunnel with a cracked wall that needs fixing!”

Several moments later, 47989 is sitting up, blinking out sync, and drooling from the corner of its mouth, but its mangled mental link is up and running.

“Huuuh... how?”

387 gives 156 a smug smile.

“I take it you have never been posted to the lower levels of the hive as an infiltrator of your rank, hmm?”

“Not really. I spent most of my time trudging between the southern villages and the hive with the love I stole,” admits 156.

“Drones are a miracle of life, in a way. They get hurt on a daily basis - cave-in, random slips with eggs here, aggressive cave worms or blasts of gas there. With our queen’s *overly caring and loving* approach only those who know how to patch each other up get to see their second week. It’s pretty much the only knowledge aside from the map of the hive and digging instincts that they have without the information inside the hive mind.”

“Hmmm...”

“Doesn’t leave a great aftertaste, does it?”

“Not really, no...” 156 sighs.

“So what now?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“I can’t really do math anymore but I can still count upwards from zero a bit and I’m forced to agree that you’re the top rank around here now that the queen got up and left for some R’n’R.”

“Ooookay,” 156 rubs her temples, “I think that a good idea would be to have someone who had enough access to the hive mind as well as the brainpower to retain some of its knowledge. Queen-”

“Vacation.”

“Yes, *I get it*,” 156 glares at 387, “With her out of the picture, how about 1?”

“Blasted off by the invasion-ending love eruption into the sky with a string of curse words I would like to try out at some point. Really inspirational in a way.”

“You saw it?”

“Didn’t *you*? I was just outside the Canterlot throne room after bringing some six mares back from the vaults. 1 was pretty loud when the shockwave hit.”

“I was on my way to the gardens to help deal with some still resisting guards. Missed most of the action, really,” 156 shrugs, “So... how about 2?”

“Found dead in the Canterlot castle cake storage under unforeseen circumstances before the queen took over the place. We only saw her shadow burned into the wall with some ruined cakes around it.”

“How did you know it was 2?”

“The shadow was *extremely* anatomically accurate.”

“Okay, 3?”

For the first time, 387 salutes and his eyes tear up.

“The only warrior in the top five. He died as he lived, like a true hero and an inspiration to all warriors everywhere. Punching some massive, several buildings tall, magical stone construct the unicorns animated to help them fight us off.”

“I take it he didn’t win then?”

“Oh, he *did!*” 387 smiles with pride, “After an exhausting battle, he punched its legs off, dug through its chest to its magical diamond heart and shattered it like glass.”

“Sooo?”

“The enchanted stone was super heavy, so the remaining unicorn wizards just held him in place as it fell right on him.”

“How do you know all that anyway?”

“Eh,” 387 shrugs, “There wasn’t much to do while we were escorting the captured mares back to the castle, so I was checking the situation out through the hive links. I recall a lot of cheering around so I couldn’t have been the only one.”

“I’m afraid to ask, any info on 4?”

“Splat!”

“Crushed too?”

“Yep. He was in the back of the throne room, near the epicenter of the shockwave, examining the intricate details of the wall carvings. He’s part of them now, unless they used a really good mop.”

“5?”

“No idea, she wasn’t with the army after we broke the shield.”

“6?”

“Not... alive. Umm, can we skip details about that one? I’d rather not talk about it. Pleeese?”

“7?”

“Overhydrated.”

“What the hole?”

“Eaten by a hydra while crossing the Everfree.”

“8?”

“Dead. Paired up with 9 to kill and eat 10. She killed them both, thus achieving the high score of 109.”

“You mean 8.”

“Do I? Told you I couldn’t count now that the hive mind is defunct.”

“Anyway, killing two higher ranks at once in the top ten shouldn’t be physically possible.”

“I don’t think she survived it, if it makes you feel any better. Last time I saw her, she was bleeding out and looked like she needed less a doctor and more someone good with jigsaw puzzles.”

“So you’re telling me the entire top brass of changelings plus the queen herself are gone.”

“I mean, it *is* possible that some of the tops survived in the end but from what I saw, it always ended with a crunch and a dead hive link. Can’t say more past that.”

47989 wobbles over to the duo, one eye partially closed, mouth full of leaves, and a string of drool from its corner reaching all the way down to the ground.

156 sighs.

“That’s not edible, you know? We eat *love*, not *leaves*. It sounds similar, that much I grant you.”

47989 slowly shakes its head and spits all the leaves but one out. The one is bigger and not just fresh green, rather boasting the first colors of autumn - fading from green to yellow and red all in one. The drone pushes it out with its tongue and presents its tip to 156 who glances 387’s way.

“Don’t look at me, I don’t eat that either,” he shrugs.

“It’s a thank you. It’s pretty,” calls out 6689. All the changelings around go deathly quiet. It doesn’t pay to speak up when not spoken to by a high-rank and it’s not a mistake a ling makes twice. 6689’s confidence drains *instantly*, “Umm, we didn’t often get many colors underground...”

156 *feels* as if she should be outraged but for the love of holes can’t figure out why. A lot of previously obvious things are murky at best now that the bulk of the shared hive knowledge is gone and she’s right in the middle of the mess.

In the end, she takes the colorful leaf and tucks it into a random leg hole. It’s bound to fall out in a few steps but somehow she knows that it’s the gesture that matters, not the thank you gift itself.

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“Just don’t pet it,” adds 387, “With its concussion, it would die,” as 47989 shuffles back to the other drones visibly confused by the timers of their lives still ticking, 387 whispers to 156, “You know that’s not healing any time soon and we need to get moving, right? I can wait until it’s dark and make it look natural-”

“387, has any creature ever liked you without venom?” asks 156.

“Can’t say, really. I was just a hive guard, not one of you fancy infiltrators who got out and saw the world,” 387 shrugs, “Not my role to try and get liked.”

“Thought so. Congratulations, now you’re about to get your chance.”

“You know, all those words *sounded* nice but for some reason they made my carapace crawl.”

“Hey, 47989,” 156 calls out which makes all the drones huddle together for moral support, “387 here offered to carry you until you can walk without slowing us down. Said it was only *natural* to help.”

“You smug anus...” 387 breathes out.

“What was that?”

“Yes, smug anus ma’am.”

“That’s better.”

65536: 1

Changeling drone 65536 is leisurely strolling through the hallways of Canterlot castle. All of the nasty iron-wearing, pointy-speared guard ponies are gone, the queen is in the throne room, singing something victorious. It's like when 97889 tried to do a drone radio station through the hive mind back home before it was told to stop wasting love or be shoved into a crusher. This song is a bit too evil for 65536's taste but it still livens the feed otherwise filled with orders and map updates.

In general, now that the fighting is over, the situation calls for warriors and infiltrators to find and mop up the resistance while the drones are left to wander or simply stand around like the new weird, experimental ones the queen made specifically for the invasion.

65536 shudders. Those new, silent drones are *creepy*.

"This day has been just perfect, the kind of day-" the drone mouths quietly to the queen's singing, nodding its head to the rhythm, "-of which I've dreamt since I was a grub..."

Its quiet sing-along gets interrupted by multiple sets of galloping hoofsteps as a group of drones rush towards 65536.

"Hey, guys. What's going on?"

55684 stops abruptly by 65536 with wings buzzing, looks around in a conspiratory fashion, and says quietly:

"Didn't you hear? 11581 caught a *real* pony! One of the non-pokey or magic ones."

"Oh my holes, *really*!" 65536's jaw drops.

"Yeah! It wants to make the pony love it so that it can get fed and beat the high score!" 55684 bounces on the spot, grinning with excitement.

“Woowooooow!” 65536’s eyes go wide, “I wish I had a pony too... I could feed it, and give it all the headpats and scritches, and I could even dig its own tunnel. Small, obviously, or one of the high-ranks might come and ask questions.”

“Do you even know what ponies eat?”

65536 quickly glances out of the window overlooking Canterlot castle gardens as well as part of the gold-decorated city.

“Eeeeh, those yellow... shiny... things?”

“No, dummy. We had the briefing, remember? They eat, umm, leaves and stuff, right? And they make other things to eat from... flowers. Rainbow-colored ones specifically,” 55684 nods victoriously.

“Well,” 65536 scratches its head, “Tough to find that back home, true, but... hey, I remember! I was on egg duty once when a real mare the infiltrators caught was laying some eggs. She didn’t look *too* starved, so there must be *something* ponies can eat in the hive.”

“Pfff! Queen probably had warriors bring leaves and grass for her all the way from the Everfree forest. That’s like... imported, you know. Top-notch stuff.”

66536 shudders.

“That place is scary...”

“Agreed! Now come on, you wanna see 11581’s pony or not?”

“Sure I do! I wanna see the power-up too. Any bets on what score 11581 gets?”

“34112 is in charge of the pool. I got one shiny rock and a twig from my little bush on rank 1154 or less.”

“Yeeeah, about your bush. I think I saw something the warriors called a hydra while we were flying here and it looked suspiciously like a really big

version of your bush.”

“What? Nooo...” 55684 shakes its head, “Bushy’s no hydrant.”

“I had my suspicions the first time you showed us. I was pretty sure that bushes aren’t supposed to crawl around and have scales, teeth, and spit acid.”

65536 shares the overheard hive mind warning with the second drone.

“We have a tough carapace, spit acid, and have sharp teeth so... so I thought... it was like a bush... but a changeling bush, right? Plus, it didn’t mind that I cut its... branch off last time. It grew two more almost immediately and they were completely healthy. Shows that pruning is important!”

“All of a sudden, I’m not too keen on coming back to our shaft once we’re done here, only to find a starving little hydra waiting for us.”

“Don’t worry!” 55684 beams, “I left Bushy plenty of water and some love goo. Besides, I thought we were staying here. It’s all nice and shiny. That way we won’t have to carry all the ponies we caught all the way back to the hive.”

“Gotta admit, I like the shiny,” 65536 looks outside again, “But you can’t beat a good hole if you want some peace and quiet.”

“Can’t argue with that but those are here too! There are old tunnels all through the mountain itself. Pony-made, so pretty bleh but nothing we can’t fix in a few months. It would be just like home, only with a shiny topping.”

“You know, that *does* sound nice. What about Bushy, though? It would mean leaving it in the hive.”

“I thought about it. Most of the drones in the betting pool don’t have anything, so they are betting a favor. I just need to win and then I can ask them to get up one night and go grab Bushy. Speaking of which...” 55684

leans to 65536's ear and whispers, "No hive link convo, got it? If any of the high-ranks hear about the pony, they're bound to take it away."

"Got it. Hey, what's the top bet anyway?" 65536 joins the group of drones headed upstairs towards one of the attic storerooms.

"87911 snatched a helmet from one of the guards and bet it on rank 986 or less."

"That's crazy, 87911 is crazy..." 65536 shakes its head, "No drone ever can get that score, even if it got... twenty ponies tucked away somewhere."

"*Exactly!*" 55684 beams, "Just imagine, in a few hours I might have a shiny new helmet. No more bumps against the ceiling ever! Plus all the favors I need to switch a few shifts and get Bushy here. By the way, you betting too?"

"Sure! Sign me up for a... rusty horseshoe aaand two nails for rank... eeeh, let's play it safe - rank 3200 to 3500. It's a bit on the daring side but if someone's betting a *helmet*."

"Oh boy oh boy oh boy!" 55684 grins, "All the favors, a helmet, *and* a horseshoe? With all that neat gear I just might go for the high score myself."

"Gonna be tough. Under 2000... there are *warriors* in those ranks."

"You're right. No point in going all out and losing everything, let's leave that to 11581 and 87911."

Sudden absolute chaos *crashes* through the hive mind. Unexplained mental screaming makes the upstairs-rushing ball of drones clutch their heads and stumble towards the windows to see what's going on. 65536, however, keels over by a massive wooden door on the opposite side of the hallway, and curls up, its instincts taking over and making it harden its carapace to maximum.

A shockwave of pink washes over the area, expanding from below, and blasts the other drones out into the empty skies. 65536, though, gets shot upwards like a pinball, spins around the round ceiling of the arched hallway, gaining speed and momentum that, when he comes back down on the other side of the hall and hits an angled rim on top of the window, launches it straight through the massive oak door and into a pitch black room where it crashes against the wall.

“SHINY AND FROST-BEARING STARLIGHT! CAN WE NOT GET A SINGLE MOMENT OF PEACE IN THIS NIGHT-DAMNED CASTLE?!” yells a voice so loud it momentarily drowns out all the hive mind screams of pain and horror...

...leaving behind silence. New, empty, terrifying silence.

65536 opens its eyes when it senses light surrounding it.

It's in a... cave... no, pony room...

The drone is losing words and thoughts with every passing second. Hive links gone, hive knowledge shattered and evaporating, replaced only with *experience* - digging instincts, drone designation, and... and only the barest of basics regarding the world.

In the... small cave filled with soft things, there's a tall creature rising from a... square soft thing. There used to be a name for those creatures and things but, for the love of holes, 65536 can't remember anything anymore. The creature has a horn, not a stubby drone one but a loooong, sharp one like the infiltrators and warriors, and it has wings, or things that grow on its back where changeling wings would be and of roughly similar shape but they're weird, not translucent at all.

Blue - that's the last *concrete* thing about the creature 65536 can recall in non-changeling words, so its puzzled mind holds onto it as hard as it can.

Blue, having sat up, *glares* at 65536 with an unreadable expression which, for the drone, means any expression right now.

Blue's presence, though, is overshadowed by something, something primal in the drone's mind, and that is the warm, sweet feeling emanating from a smaller soft rectangle lying on the top part of the bigger soft rectangle next to Blue. It *draws* 65536 to itself, so the drone flies onto the rectangle right next to Blue, completely ignoring something elongated and soft harmlessly flapping against its hardened muzzle.

"Bad! Bad whatever-you-are!" says Blue. The noises don't mean anything to 65536 and it doesn't feel in any danger, so it sniffs the small rectangle and realizes the warm feeling is coming not from it but from a soft replica that looks like a tiny version of Blue, only in a different, brighter color.

Perhaps once all the chaos is over, someone will come with orders for the drone. Until then, though, there's this warm, soft non-Blue which makes 65536 feel as if everything is going to be okay.

Princess Luna stops swatting the bug-horse creature that just crashed through her several inches thick, steel-reinforced, oak door with a rolled-up yesterday's copy of Canterlot Tribune after it hugs a plushie of her sister, buries its muzzle into the plushie's chest fluff, and seemingly falls asleep.

"Did We... miss something important?" Luna raises an eyebrow and carefully leaves her suite, her magic scanning the surrounding area for any presence.

The guards are gone, and occasionally there strange green and black splatters on the walls. A quick look out of the window reveals more of the splatters along the tall wall separating the castle grounds from the rest of the city...

...and smoldering black shapes in the gardens as well as squishy green cocoons seemingly containing *ponies*.

Contrary to the unexplained weirdness, there don't seem to be any commotion which would require her immediate attention, so she keeps her careful pace and heads for the throne room. Celestia would know what's

going on. After all, Luna had been away for a millennium so this might all be a... festival of sorts or something.

As she enters the throne room, she immediately notices a black shape similar to that of the creature in her room, only over twice its size, fused with the decorative carvings on the wall.

“Sist-”

Celestia hasn’t spotted her yet, busy giving orders to a pair of unicorns armored from head to hooves in white and gold full plate mails.

“...ugh, paladins...” Luna stops herself from calling out and mutters, “...their religious fanaticism is the only thing bigger than our sister’s cake-fueled backside...”

“Sun’s Fury!” Celestia barks out and the paladin in question salutes, “I want the city *scoured* from the tallest towers to the cellars of lower Canterlot. If any of the changelings are still alive, *purge* them immediately. This attack can’t be left unanswered. Holy Flare, set up a special unit to figure out where the changelings came from and how they infiltrated Canterlot even before the main wave of the invasion itself.”

“Yes, your solar Majesty!” Holy Flare salutes.

“WE SHALL PURGE ALL HERETICS WITH HOLY FLAMES AND YOUR ETERNAL BURNING RAGE, DIVINE EMPRESS!” Sun’s Fury joins in.

“And make sure my sister is okay!”

“THE TRAITO-” Sun’s Fury becomes the recipient of the “*One more word and you’re next at the stake*” award, and bows, mumbling, “I will do as instructed, Empr-” another glare from Celestia, “Princess.”

Luna silently backs out of the throne room and, once out of sight, teleports back into her suite. A quick repair spell fixes her door, and she manages to get back into the bed and cover the quietly purring changeling with a

blanket just as the irritatingly aggressive knocking of somepony who doesn't respect her at all resonates through the suite.

She telekinetically unlocks the door and calls out:

"Come in!"

Sun's Fury in full armor stomps into the suite and casts a scanning spell which reveals nothing suspicious around and can't penetrate the barrier around Luna's bed.

"A paladin?" Luna fakes surprise, "Is anything wrong?"

"Your sister sent me to check if you're okay, trait- princess."

"Of course, why wouldn't We be?"

"...shouldastayedonthemoon..." mutters Sun's Fury before saying out loud, "Canterlot has been attacked by an army of changelings, princess."

"Oh dear, was it? I must have slept through it all."

"...incompetent moon-lover..."

"Did you say anything? The soundproofing spell around the bed is rather powerful," Luna narrows her eyes.

"I said that Her Majesty will be relieved to hear that you're unharmed."

"Majesty is a title for queens, not princesses. The correct one is either princess or Highness."

"I'll keep that in mind..." Sun's Fury grumbles and leaves.

Luna takes a deep, relieved breath in and out.

"Now what do We do with this little disaster?" she scratches behind the ear.

The drone goes blep and starts drooling all over plush Celestia.

156, 387: 2

The group of thirty-ish changelings stopped in a small clearing after the infiltrator and three warriors sent to scout ahead returned with the news that there's some kind of a pony settlement to the north of them. Two infiltrators were sent there again to figure out the details which, while being the basic and indisputably necessary tactic, brought with it its own set of challenges.

"For the *last time* - BARK IS NOT EDIBLE!" yells 387.

"Mphfufh?"

"We're not wasting energy on hive link communication so stop trying to talk with your mouth full! It. Won't. Work!"

Gulp!

"SPIT IT OUT! DON'T SWALLOW IT!" 387 facehoofs, "I swear, if I have to carry around a second concussed drone I'm going to make sure it's *you*!"

47989 acknowledges being mentioned by giving the back of 387's neck a hug and licking his ear.

"And you stop slobbering all over my carapace. If you don't get better by the time we find a stream or a slow river, I'm walking into it with you still on my back."

"You know, you *could* try to reason with them instead of being all snarky," 156 is sitting cross-legged in the center of the clearing, eyes closed.

"No. You ordered me to carry this waste of holes but I'm drawing the line at being nice."

"Kinda amazing that they have the energy to screw around, anyway. They've been lugging the cocooned ponies we captured in Riverside all this time," 156 looks around at the drones busy with crawling on trees,

examining the foliage, and generally bumping into each other while trying to figure out what the non-rock-dirt-and-hole things surrounding them are for.

“Meh, drones. They dig and carry stuff, that’s pretty much effortless for their natural forms just like punching stuff is for us warriors and being tall, smug, and snooty noodles is for you infiltrators.”

“There’s way more to us than what you just described. Also, if you said anything even remotely similar back in the hive, you’d be kissing the crusher right now.”

“If the queen got a wind of you not immediately killing off a *drone* that stopped being useful, you’d be there before me and I’d be laughing until my lungs were gone.”

“I have half a mind to teach you some respect right here and now.”

“No, you only have half a mind if you think you’d be able to.”

“Oh? Does someone want to give the high score a shot?”

“Warrior high score is 3 so no, thanks,” 387 rolls his eyes, “And double no, this isn’t just a hole measuring contest, 156, it’s a fact. If we both were full on love, I’d happily accept you could crumple me into a ball and dribble me around. As things stand, though, you don’t have the love for all your fancy infiltrator enhancements and tricks and I have a warrior’s natural body, so take a note from 36658 and go eat a chunk of bark.”

“Does that mean I can have more?” the mentioned drone’s eyes light up.

“NO, YOU CAN’T! What *species* are you?!”

“But I like how crunchy it is...”

“Look at 47989! Look at *iiiiit*! It still can’t blink with both eyes at the same time. This is your fault!”

47989 dazedly waves at 36658 to show there are no hard feelings.

“See? No biggie,” 36658 smiles.

“Is that so? Then it can walk on its own from now on.”

“Nope, that was a punishment for offering to quietly kill it and make it look like an accident,” 156 butts in with a smirk, “Oh my, I guess the secret is out.”

47989 gasps and bites 387’s ear.

“Ow! What the hole, you little derp?” 387 turns his head at the offending drone lying on his back.

“Pfbfbfbfbf!” 47989 sticks its tongue out.

“I should have left with the queen like 56 and 98...” 387 sighs.

“You mean as an emergency ration?”

“At least that way someone would be carrying *me*.”

“You do realize no one is forcing you to stay with us, right?” 156 still hasn’t even opened her eyes.

“Considering that only the two of us are of high enough rank with the personal knowledge to keep up at least some basic hive mind running for the others, the winner of today’s dumbest comment iiiiiis!” 387 pauses for dramatic effect, “Youuuuu! A round of applause, everyone, if you will.”

The drones start cheering, some even add a few whistles. 36658 happily foams at the mouth from overstuffing itself with bark again.

387 walks over to it, grabs it by its neck, and violently punches its stomach several times. 36658 immediately proceeds to throw up all over him.

“Instant karma,” comments 156 as 387 rips out a clump of grass from the ground and starts wiping himself off with an expression of utter disgust.

“Hey, it worked!” 36658 clutches its stomach with a groan, “Owwww... almost worked.”

“What?” say 156 and 387 simultaneously.

“You made me throw up. That means I can chew all the bark I want and we don’t have to risk anyone slipping while jumping on me again.”

“You *planned* this?!” 156 finally breaks her meditation and looks up directly at the swaying drone, incredulity etched on her face.

“Well, yeah. We just need to do some fine tuning on the punching strength but for the first test it went pretty well.”

“Congratulations, you’ve reached levels of stupidity I never thought possible while at the same time still outclassing any plan 156 has put up so far. Bittersweet, really.”

“Seriously, high score in assholery incoming, 387.”

“Woooo!” cheer the drones, “High score! High score!”

“Don’t encourage him...” 156 sighs.

“You know... I feel a lot better all of a sudden,” 387 cracks his neck and stretches, “Anyone else wants to give the bark a shot? Punching that moron was pretty therapeutic.”

“Sure, but later,” 36658 nods, clearly considering the situation a perfectly valid quid pro quo, “I think I’ve had enough for now.”

57999 hesitantly raises its foreleg.

“I’d like to try but with a bit less punch-”

“No!” 156’s eye twitches, “Go... go hug a bush or something.”

“Woohoo!” the majority of the drones sprint out of the clearing and disappear into the forest.

“Excellent job, oh great leader,” 387 facehoofs, “How many do you think will return?”

“I’m sure a clever warrior like you can wrangle nineteen drones. Wait, fifteen. I forgot about 47989 and the three Silents.”

47989 nibbles absent-mindedly at 387’s head fin and the three motionless drones 156 mentioned don’t react whatsoever, sitting still. To her surprise, 387 lets the comment go for once, instead giving the Silents a worried look.

“*What are they*, anyway?” he asks, “Everything about them just keeps rubbing me the wrong way.”

“Oh right, you warriors weren’t involved in the queen’s project,” replies 156, choosing her next words carefully not to upset the already fragile loyalty inside the group of survivors, “If I told you not to worry about them, would it be enough?”

“Hole no!”

“Okay, what about them bothers you the most? Let’s start with that.”

“The fact that when I look inside their heads, there’s *nothing*.”

“I… see, the main part. I was hoping you were a little less smart,” 156 frowns, “Look, the queen needed bodies to break through the magic shield surrounding Canterlot. There weren’t enough drones and there wasn’t enough time or resources to hatch them. In light of that, the queen dusted off an old project of hers, no idea how old - a way to avoid nurturing the brain of new changelings, which is the most love-consuming part of our growth, and focus only on their bodies. We call those changelings Silents because, well, as you noticed they aren’t much more than just blank slates waiting for orders.”

387 gags, 156 shoots him a dirty look in response.

“Most of you low-ranks and the drones are still alive only because the queen created them so don’t give me that, otherwise it would have been

your carapace splattered against the first cracks in the barrier,” she hisses at the now emptily retching warrior, “Besides, you wanted to kill 47989 because of a bump on its head.”

“That was out of *mercy* and for the sake of my sanity!” growls 387, “A deal between changelings! Not... not the queen and her mindless tools. What was stopping her from eventually replacing *all of us* like that?! Just her, a few useful unique top ranks, and an army of Silents.”

“Is it really that different from the queen ordering *you* to do something? It’s not as if you could refuse anyway.”

“No, don’t you dare defend her... her crime against nature!”

“Anyway, so what?!” 156 stares him down, “Do you want to leave them standing here until they starve now that you know what they are? Because that’s what they’re going to do if you don’t order them anything.”

“No, I don’t...” 387 hangs his head after a while.

“Then it’s settled. Discussion over. Topic closed,” growls 156. To her surprise, 387 quietly sits down and lets 47989 slide down from his back. The drone flops on the grass and starts rolling around in the warm sunlight, “Huh, what’s it doing?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” replies 387.

“387?”

“I’ve always known you infiltrators were arrogant bastards who didn’t value the lives of anyone below your rank but until now I didn’t know that you were *monsters* with absolutely no honor who would be part of something this... *abominable*,” he breathes out through gritted teeth.

“You can think what you want,” 156 scowls, “The project saved more lives-”

“How many Silents were present during the invasion in total? Give me a rough estimate, *please*,” the final word slipping out like acid.

“Hundred and fifty thousand... give or take.”

“There were less than eighty thousand real changelings,” 387 bares his teeth at 156, “So tell me again how many more lives your insanity saved?!”

“If we had the time and resources to breed full changelings, we would have! Is that so difficult to get through your thick warrior skull?”

“Then why did we have to rush? Why didn’t we take over smaller villages, gain strength, and then go to Canterlot with a full army? Why did we arrive on the day when there were THREE alicorns present in the city and AFTER the ponies knew about us and erected that damn shield?”

“We went when the queen told us to,” says 156 simply, “We went because she wanted it.”

“But why?”

156 sighs.

“I don’t know, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? Maybe if you asked someone higher, they’d know-”

“I did ask,” 387 frowns, “That’s the problem.”

“Who?”

“I asked 6 before I bashed his head into paste with a rock. He didn’t know either.”

Total silence.

“That’s impossible,” says 156 flatly.

“6 would disagree if he could.”

“I’m going to need some details here.”

“I told you before that I didn’t want to talk about but hey, now that I know you’ve done something waaaay worse and 6 was likely a crucial part of the Silents project, all my doubts are gone.”

“There is *no way in hole* a rank 387 would even remotely get close to touching rank 6, no matter what kind of a moment of surprise you could concoct. 6 could kill you with a *glance*.”

“He was the most smug, arrogant, heartless stain you could have found. Or maybe all the top ranks are like that, I don’t know. He got... *peckish* on the way to Canterlot, so he stayed a bit behind and started eating low ranks. I was part of the rear guard of the swarm and we quickly realized that we couldn’t run and 6 was nowhere close to stopping. Some seven thousand changelings got killed taking him down through sheer attrition. None of us were too full of love, not even the top ranks, so eventually... we got him. I finished him off and I was the only one who survived, everyone else either died of their wounds or during the fight itself. The queen didn’t even notice the entire rear guard was gone, she only kept threatening that if 6 deserted he’d be a dessert once we won at Canterlot. She didn’t ask me any questions or probe my mind, it just didn’t even occur to her that something like that could have happened.”

156 can’t think of anything to say to that.

47989 starts rubbing its head against 387’s side.

“What now?” the warrior asks quietly.

The drone hugs him.

“You should know that I only wanted to kill you so that you didn’t suffer. The rock you hit was pretty big,” mumbles 387.

“Amm gud,” 47989 blinks out of sync as it surprises itself by speaking. 387 goes ‘huh?’, raises his hoof to pat 47989’s head, decides against it and scratches the underside of its muzzle instead before turning towards 156.

“Fine, you were right, I was wrong... this time.”

The infiltrator measures him for a few seconds before replying:

“Let’s say that we both may have been not *entirely* right... at certain points in time, and let’s try to think of what we’re going to do from now on instead. After all, what’s the current status of our group? Report!”

“Three infiltrators, six warriors, sixteen drones, three Silents. Drone 47989 temporarily out of commission. Everyone else is hungry but in passable shape. We’re carrying thirteen cocoons with ponies, neither of which will last another week unless we find a fresh source of love to refresh the goo. The warriors are stationed around in a pentagonal pattern, we don’t have the love to maintain hive links across the necessary distance to keep up comms with the two infiltrators you sent to scout out the pony settlement, the Silents are waiting for orders, and drones are holes-know-where. We don’t have any technical gear at our disposal.”

“Well done, warrior.”

387 salutes, giving in to his instincts. 47989 stands up next to him, mimicking the gesture.

“At ease,” 156 nods, “Now, I recall something vague about my plans being unsatisfactory to you, 387.”

“Well,” he scratches his head, “Everything you said was more a wish than a strategy-”

“So we are going to prepare a basic plan which we’ll adapt based on the information my scouts return with.”

“We?”

“Yes, 387. I wouldn’t dream about proceeding without your input.”

“You’re just screwing with me now, aren’t you?”

“At this point it’s roughly fifty-fifty,” she nods, “Now go round up the drones in case we need to move out quickly.”

387 sighs.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Author's Notes:

Greeeat, made it 2 chapters without heavy stuff, lore, and tragedy.
I just want to write something fun and then my head happens. Every.
Single. Time.

156, 387: 3

156 measures both infiltrators sent out for detailed scouting as the higher-ranked one reports their consolidated findings regarding the nearby pony settlement set up in the middle of the forest for reasons unknown to the group of changelings.

“It’s not actually an organized town, that’s the problem,” explains 918, “It’s some kind of a... logging camp with semi-permanent buildings. There are four foals, and out of the estimated eighty ponies we’ve seen ten mares and it didn’t look as if there would be many more. With several exceptions, all stallions we saw were in great physical shape. If we try to use force, it can backfire really badly, if I may offer an opinion.”

“Huh, sausage fest,” comments 387, “At least that makes our job easier.”

“I was half expecting you to say *your job*, seeing that all three of us are female-”

“...am not...” mumbles 1988 quietly, earning a slightly raised eyebrow from 387 and his entry to the conversation being completely missed by 156.

“-and your warriors are, you know, warriors,” finishes 156.

“Still changelings,” 387 shrugs, “I’m not seeing the problem here.”

“The problem is that we don’t have the love to make any big changes so your natural disguises are the only way we can do this, and I doubt that a suddenly arriving squad of barely female bodybuilders would blend in.”

“Some stallions dig that and I respect them for it. Still, six to one stallions to mares,” sneers 387, “If they’ve been here for a while then I’m pretty sure we could waltz in *undisguised* and win just due to our leg holes. It’s not as if the mares would object to some relief.”

“What about the foals, can we use them in any way?” 156 nods at 918.

“47989 could use someone around its level of intelligence,” 387 nudges the drone resting by his side who looks up, gives him a dizzy smile, and nuzzles his hind leg. 387 frowns and carefully pats its head, “Now you’re making me feel bad for saying that.”

“As you should,” 156 looks at him meaningfully, “The drones aren’t stupid, they just don’t have access to the hive mind information or any personal experience with anything past hive duties- STOP CHEWING ON THAT TREE! BOTH OF YOU!”

36658 covers its mouth and gives her the most innocent look it can. 57999 sitting next to it drops the small piece it’s been holding and nibbling on left behind by 36658’s rampage and hides its forelegs behind its back.

“A-hem,” 918 clears her throat, “May I continue?”

“Go on,” 156 nods, “387, stop interrupting.”

918 gives him a nervous look that ends on 156.

“387 is right, though. The levels of pent-up lust we felt while snooping around were off the charts all over. Very little love, though, so we still have to cocoon anyone we capture to get a decent amount. As for the general mood, the ponies don’t seem to be aware of any danger. It is possible that the news about the changeling invasion haven’t reached this place at all yet.”

“That opens some interesting options...” nods 387.

“Such as?” 156 raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, ponies didn’t know about us before the invasion at all, did they?”

“I’m not aware of it, no.”

“Sooo... why would we need to waste love on disguises?”

“Warriors...” 156 rolls her eyes, “How do you intend to replace someone’s beloved without looking like them?”

“They literally just said there’s no love there. Any amount we can get would be through cocooning.”

“We can still go for affection or friendship.”

“And if ponies have no clue who we are, what’s stopping us from earning it without a disguise?”

156 opens her mouth to object but to her absolute shock realizes that she’s out of arguments. She’s always done infiltration the usual, quickest, and least traceable way but like this... when they don’t have the love already and there’s no quick fix to be found...

“They’ll attack us on sight even without knowing the news. We look terrifying to them!” she finds a viable objection.

“Here’s an idea - we throw a drone their way and see what happens.”

“Stop trying to get rid of 47989!”

“As fun as it would be to watch it trying to write the first drool-to-ponish dictionary, I wasn’t thinking about 47989 this time. Neither the bark-eater and its newfound apprentice. Of course, the Silents are out of the question too.”

156’s brain freezes. Did a warrior just outplan her?

“We likely won’t be able to get the drone out if things get hairy,” she shakes her head, “They outnumber us and, as 918 said, they’re in great shape physically. Plus, logging camp means easy access to tools, namely axes.”

“Any volunteers?” 387 calls out without even turning his head.

The small crowd of drones eagerly listening while either lounging around, digging out small holes in the ground, or trading interesting twigs and rocks gathered before the warriors rounded them up for the report, they all raise their forelegs.

47989 does so too. 387 grabs its hoof and lowers it.

“It’s going to be dangerous and if things go wrong, we *won’t* come for you. Even if you try to escape we’re going to move away from here so that you can’t lead the ponies to us,” 156 reiterates the situation, completely confused by the drones’ eagerness, “You’ll *die!*”

“I didn’t even get to see a pony in Canterlot!” one raises a voice.

“Yeah, and in Riverside it all went holes up because the queen was hungry again.”

“And nuts!” comes another voice from the back.

“That too!” more drones nod, “She kept yelling about her being alone and empty and banging her head on the walls.”

“Looked cool with her mane, though,” adds one, “Good ear for the rhythmic beat too. Unts unts unts-”

“Unts unts unts unts!” the drones start headbanging in the air as one.

156 *glares*.

“Screw it, one less mouth to feed,” she facehoofs after solid twenty seconds of watching the drones figure out a beat, each adding its own version and turning it into a chaotic mess.

Horrible croaking grunting cuts through the melody as 36658 starts choking. With a roll of his eyes, 387 walks over there and punches it several times until it throws up.

“Hey, that’s a cool sound! Lemme try,” the bashing of 387’s hoof on chitin inspires a drone to start smacking the carapace of the one next to it. Them being drones, it results in no damage.

“Who’s the lowest rank here?” asks 387, completely drowned out by the drones discovering the magic of music, unfortunately each at its own pace and style.

“What?”

“Who is the lowest rank here?!” 387 raises his voice.

“Whaaaaaat?”

“SILENCE!” calls out 156, sending out a mental prod everyone’s way. That tiny bit of energy is a small price to pay for her sanity, “The next drone to make a noise gets eaten, starting from hooves so that it can watch. Understood?”

Hasty nodding.

“Ehm, who’s the lowest rank here?” 387 tries again.

A hoof raises in the back of the drone mosh pit, this time with far more hesitation than before.

“What’s your rank?”

Silence.

“Rank. Drone!” 387 frowns.

The drone shakes its head and covers its mouth with its free foreleg.

“You can speak now, 156 won’t eat you,” 387’s eye twitches.

“91887,” peeps the drone quietly, not letting its eyes leave 156.

“Did you volunteer to go make the first contact?” asks 156.

“Mhm,” 91887 nods, encouraged by currently not being eaten.

“Alright, I will transfer the full map to you through the hive link,” 156’s stubby horn flashes.

91887 keels over with a yelp of pain and starts foaming at the mouth, its eyes rolled back and its legs twitching.

387 facehoofs.

“What the-?” 156 rushes over to it.

“What did you do?!” one either terminally brave or doubtlessly suicidal drone jumps between 156 and 91887 in an attempt to stop the infiltrator. 156 just effortlessly shoves it aside and puts her horn to 91887’s head. The foaming slowly stops, and 91887 sits up, clutching its head.

“Owowowowowwww...”

“Congratulations,” says 387, “You tried to copy an infiltrator-level detailed map into the head of a drone who hasn’t been hooked up for at least three weeks. Wanna see how it’s done?”

156 turns to face 387, fury burning in her eyes.

“What do you think you can teach me about mental skills, *warrior*?”

“Nothing,” 387 shrugs.

“And don’t you dare forget th-”

“I don’t have to,” 387 points at the brave drone, “You, rank?”

“9999.”

“Did you hear the report?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good. The camp is that way,” 387 points in the vague direction of more and more greenery, “Go.”

Some drones start chanting: “Hero! Hero! Hero!”

It quickly grows as the other drones join in, although slightly muffled not to annoy 156 again. Drones are fully aware how close to being a snack they are whenever a high rank is around.

9999 disappears into the foliage, followed by an absolutely incredulous, jaw-dropped expression of 156.

“*That* is the level of detail drones can handle,” 387 smirks, smugness positively *dripping* from him.

156 breathes out.

“I must have spent way too much time among ponies...”

“Hey,” 387 shrugs, “I spent way too much time inside the hive. If we put your infiltrator ego down a notch, we might just make a good duo.”

156 takes a long breath, at first to bark out something derisive about warriors again but it changes into an exhausted breath out.

“I’m sorry for losing my cool like that,” she says, “Don’t take it the wrong way but without the queen I’m the one in charge here and... and I’ve seen enough death in the past month than I ever wanted to. I don’t want to risk losing anyone here,” she glances at the drones who twitch in sync, “Even through their own sheer stupidity.”

47989 walks over and drops a beautiful purple flower in front of her. 156 looks around the now stomped down clearing due to it having been a changeling resting place for several hours.

“Where and *when* do you keep finding these? I swear there’s nothing more than grass around here.”

47989 shrugs.

“Everyone, grab the cocoons and let’s move!” orders 387, which makes 156 snap out of her flower-induced confusion.

“Right, right,” she shakes her head, “We have to get out of here. 1988, go keep an eye on 9999. If it walks too far from us, it’ll forget how to speak ponish. Don’t risk interfering with anything that happens to it, though. I’ll leave a pheromone trail for you to find us later.”

“Understood,” the ‘female’ infiltrator heads off.

Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh! REAL PONIES UP CLOSE! I can almost touch them...

“By Celestia’s divine backside, what the hay is that thing?” a burly-sounding earth pony who’s been sawing a log with his friend using a double-handled saw looks up and immediately trots over to a stump with a sharp axe buried in it.

9999 realizes that for some unknown reason, the bush in which it was hiding and gathering courage is several pony lengths behind it now.

“Hi!” 9999 puffs out its chest. It’s on a mission and there’s nowhere to run, “Don’t be scared, I don’t bite.”

“Scared?” the other earth pony stands up to his full height, “You ain’t the scary one here, little critter.”

9999 gulps, looking up... and up... and up.

Remember - nowhere to run, nowhere to run, nowhere to run!

However, there’s a limit to bravery when faced with something three times one’s size and armed.

“EEEEEEEEK!” 9999 turns around and bolts, “THICK BUSH IS BEST FRIEND!”

Its legs pick up speed, too bad that all of them are in the air already as the earth pony scoops 9999 up.

“Sheesh, calm down, critter,” the pony raises 9999 to his eye-height, his plate-like hoof easily supporting the drone’s midsection as its legs keep flailing wildly, “I’m not the one with sharp teeth here.”

“In the game of rock-teeth-axe, axe always wins!” squeaks 9999, “I just wanted to see a pony up closeeeeeee!” it goes limp and starts sobbing, “Now I’m gonna get hacked in half and then there’ll be two 4999s and I dunno where the 0001 is gonna beeeeeee!”

The second pony walks over, axe-less. In 9999’s eyes, though, the potential of the axe is ever-present.

“It’s terrified.”

“You don’t say...” the huge one gives 9999 to the axe one. He’s smaller but that just means all his deadliness is more concentrated.

“Pleeeeeease don’t break me with math, axe ponyyyy...”

“What are you even-? Nevermind,” the axe pony huffs and firmly shakes 9999, “Can you calm down for a second?”

In light of the continuing lack of maiming and integer-proof division, 9999 wipes its eyes and examines the pony holding him in closer detail.

“YOU’RE SO FLUFFY!” 9999’s eyes light up.

“I am not!” the pony huffs indignantly.

“Must be all the coat conditioner your wife sent you,” the huge pony snickers.

“That bottle is filled with vodka and you know it!”

“Oh suuuure.”

“You’re both so squishy and fluffy!” 9999 starts touching and nuzzling the axe pony’s fetlocks. It suddenly freezes, “Oh holes, that’s why the disguise idea didn’t work last time...”

“What disguise?” asks the axe pony, narrowing his eyes.

“Did I say that out loud? Oops,” 9999 scratches its head, “Well, 87789 tried visiting some ponies after coloring itself up with this soft rock that makes lines. It didn’t end well.”

“You mean... chalk?”

“I... dunno. Maybe? I can tell you how it smells and tastes and feels. Do you eat this chalk thingie?”

“Hay no. It’s a rock, ponies don’t eat that. We can’t even smell that.”

“Then I’m out of ideas.”

“What happened to your numbers friend?”

“Resting in pieces,” 9999 salutes, “So far from the high score but it was a good effort.”

“Oh...” the axe pony lowers 9999 down, “That explains why you were so scared. Don’t worry, nopony’s gonna hurt you ‘round here. When you’re deep in the forest most of your time, you see worse things than small, weird, bug ponies.”

“Ohhh yeah,” the huge pony laughs, “Like that unicorn who travels the northeast wilds. He had a mare with him that caught fire when she got mad. I’m not slapping that plot ever again, heh.”

“Anyhoo,” the axe pony stands up and stretches, “What now? You gonna run off back into the forest or what?”

“Can’t! I’m supposed to have a look at what’s going on with this place,” 9999 shakes its head.

“S’posed to?” the huge pony raises an eyebrow, “Did somepony send you here?”

“Mhm,” 9999 nods.

“Who?”

“Can’t say in case you’re bad guys.”

The two ponies exchange glances.

“I guess we should take you to the foreman.”

“What does that word mean?” 9999 tilts its head, adding suspiciously, “Is that an axe thing?”

“The pony in charge.”

“Phew, good. That’s a great idea!” 9999 hops up and down, “That way I can make a good impression and everyone will be happy.”

“I’m sure you will. Hop on, it’s a bit of a trek even without your stubby legs,” the axe pony grabs 9999 and puts it on his back. To his friend, he adds, “Can you finish up here? I’ll take the second half of your shift tomorrow.”

“No biggie.”

Riding on the axe pony’s back, 9999 quietly squees to itself.

Ponies are so warm and fuzzy!

Ehm, I mean... mission accomplished!

Author's Notes:

If anyone thinks there's bound to be a heavy metal drone band...

...they're absolutely right.

65536: 2

Night falls on Canterlot.

The city is uncharacteristically silent because sleep is the last thing on the minds of ponies. Hospitals are overflowing, although thankfully even the worst of physical wounds are limited to deep bites or broken bones so far. Of course, that's not to say that there aren't victims of the changeling invasion, mostly the guards protecting the castle and ponies trampled by fleeing crowds. However, as the peacekeeping forces kept scouring the city throughout the day, it turned out that the invasion certainly wasn't meant to kill ponies, whoever these creatures called 'changelings' were. The same thing, though, could not be said for the changelings they found.

The love wave crushed, burned, or simply punted the creatures away so hard that figuring out what the point of their attack was would be a difficult task due to the lack of survivors. So far, there are only a few clues - number one is the presumed changeling queen's evil monologue about 'feeding on love', number two is the unbelievable extent of infiltration operations which preceded the invasion, and number three...

Luna puts the situation report down on her desk and looks backwards at her heavily padded and comfortable bed.

...clue number three is currently sleeping there, still hugging a plushie of her sister which Luna got after her return not to feel so alone during the first months.

As if feeling her eyes on it, the changeling twitches, lets out a buzzing yawn, opening its mouth wider than any pony ever could and showing a remarkably similar muzzle to a pony one barring the two rather small fangs in front, and looks around, stopping on Luna with an expression unreadable to the alicorn of the Night.

“Hmmm...” Luna purses her lips as an idea occurs to her. Those fangs *aren't* unique to changelings, actually. The problem is that finding somepony she can trust not to divulge the fact that there's a changeling in her suite might not be possible with the memories of the invasion still fresh in everypony's mind.

With the changeling just silently sitting and watching her, Luna walks over and sits down on the opposite side of the bed not to scare the creature. Whether this is pointless or not is unclear as the changeling itself leans forward, carefully sniffing the air, before standing up, taking a step forward, and seemingly having no idea how soft things work.

The soft, sleeping rectangle gives way under 65536's hooves, the drone loses its balance, and flops on the crumpled thick but also soft thing under which Blue was sleeping before. It tries to get up but everything around feels like filled with water and it keeps rolling around until something hard stops it.

Was everything this chaotic before 65536 went to sleep? It can't recall.

Carefully turning around to face the hard thing steadying it, 65536 figures out that it's Blue's foreleg. A lifeline, hurray! Using it as support, the drone eventually defeats the overly soft sleeping rectangle under its hooves and manages to stand up on all fours, its stubby horn still barely reaching sitting Blue's neck.

A memory rises through the haze covering its mind, one of a tall changeling with a long horn who was in charge. Blue isn't her but she's tall too and doesn't seem mad at 65536 which, for a reason it can't recall at the moment, she really should be. Also, her foreleg is firm but covered in something soft and fuzzy.

Hey, it's like the small version of Blue that's filled with love, the not-Blue. 65536 looks back at not-Blue, then at Blue, and again. The drone isn't particularly hungry after resting in not-Blue's presence but its instinct tells

it to figure out whether it needs digging, whether it needs carrying somewhere else, or whether it's edible.

Nom nom nom nom.

Luna raises an eyebrow as the changeling begins nibbling on her foreleg. As an alicorn, she's heavily resistant to physical damage caused by non-divine means, but even without it she's fairly certain the changeling isn't trying to harm her.

So... what does any of this mean?

"What do We do with you?" she breathes out. The changeling immediately stops whatever it's doing and looks up, "It's hard to believe all the reports and witnesses of an army of creatures like you *successfully* attacked this city less than twenty-four hours ago. The reports said that you could speak. Maybe only some of you?"

The changeling keeps staring in silence, its mouth slightly open.

Luna touches her chest and says:

"Luna."

Next, she touches the changeling's chest. It nuzzles her foreleg in response. Luna tries again, slower and a little louder.

"Lu-na."

Upon touching the changeling's chest, it opens its muzzle, mouths something, pauses, and starts opening and closing its mouth in complete silence for a few moments. Eventually, it sticks its tongue out, squints at it, and sighs. With its next look up at Luna, it shakes its head.

Luna smiles.

“So you *do* understand something and you can’t speak, hmm?” she pats the changeling’s head which makes it stop fidgeting and just lean into the patting, “Or maybe that’s not entirely correct either,” she frowns, “This is going to need some research, one which with all our duties We can’t do on our own. Unfortunately for you, the second you leave this room you’re going to get impaled on a spike, if you’re lucky, and We have no way of explaining this to you.”

Luna stands up and starts pacing back and forth, lost in planning. When she snaps back to reality, she stops and sees the changeling copying her. It stops after one more round, sits down, and looks up.

“Stay here,” she says. In light of no reaction, she pokes the changeling’s chest and then a spot on the floor. On the second attempt, it walks over there and sits down. Luna smiles, nods, and leaves.

The two Nightguards stationed at her door acknowledge her presence with a quick bow which she requites. Her relationship with the batponies is incomparable to her sister and the Royal Guards, so maybe she doesn’t have to be alone in this changeling research.

“Bring Sharp Biscuit here,” she orders, “We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

65536 was asked to stay and guard this particular spot of the soft, tickly thing all over the floor... probably.

So it does. Drones know how to conserve energy.

What keeps creeping into its mind, though, is the idea that, for no reason 65536 can think of, Blue is supposed to be really mad at it. Something must have happened. After all, drones should be in cold, hard, jagged caves, digging or carrying eggs, not in warm albeit dark, smooth caves with many many soft things.

Soft things that *definitely aren’t scary at all no matter how confused they make its legs!* Things like the treacherous sleepy rectangle... all right one

moment but made of pure confusion later.

65536 gives the sleepy rectangle a narrow-eyed glare filled with suspicion. At least it doesn't seem to be able to go after the drone once it's out of the rectangle's overly soft clutches.

Bed.

Like a spark bursting into life, the mental fog inches away, revealing the sleepy rectangle's name.

"Hah?!" the drone lets out a sharp gasp, its eyes lighting up for the briefest of moments before the knowledge fades, replaced by a headache that grows and grows and grows.

As Luna returns from her personal section of the castle vault with what looks like a simple silver necklace, the two Nightguards on shift are by her door again, though now accompanied by a third one - grey, purple-maned, and sinewy with golden eyes.

"I was hoping for a break tonight, Luna," Sharp Biscuit gives the princess a soft smile which fades when she doesn't return it, "What's wrong?"

"I'll show you," her royal 'We' disappears as she cracks the door open and peeks inside before rushing in and slamming it behind herself.

"Luna?" Sharp knocks on the wood.

"A moment!"

She stops in front of the whimpering changeling twitching on the floor and covering its head with both forelegs.

"Hey!" she says quietly, touching its back. It doesn't seem to register her at all, "Damn it, everything was fine when I left."

She grits her teeth, her brain looking overtime for potential problems and solutions. One, the changeling shot through a magically sealed and physically reinforced double door and was physically unharmed. Two, after some rest it seemed okay. Three, she left. Four, she returned and now it's clearly in pain.

Source of the problem? Unknown.

Solution? Unknown.

Well done, brain. You have to try harder to earn tonight's cake.

After the changeling landed here, it ignored her and cuddled up with the plush of her sister.

The report mentioned their queen speaking about invading Canterlot because of love.

She replaced Cadance and fed on her husband-to-be's love. In the end, she was powerful enough to face Celestia's self-imposed power limitation and admitted it was because of the love she *stole*.

It was to *feed*. Feeding means to be healthy.

Luna has been sleeping with the plushie every single day since her return. She levitates mini-Celestia and puts it next to the squirming changeling.

Its heavy breathing slows down shortly after it pulls the plush into a vice-like grip. Luna waits a little longer and, to her surprise, the changeling stumbles back into a sitting position, swaying slightly. It looks around, brows furrowed, gasps, and shuffles back to the *exact* spot where Luna pointed before leaving, pulling the plushie along by its leg in its mouth.

As if nothing happened, it looks at the princess, although she can see its forehead twitching slightly along with mild swaying of its entire body.

A migraine? I had episodes like this after my return, having to read everything regarding the current state of Equestria with Nightmare's

influence untangling from me. Anyway, quick thinking, brain. Cake reward earned.

Luna walks over to the door, peeks outside, and beckons Sharp Biscuit in. He enters, looks at the sitting changeling hugging the white plushie with easily visible stains of green drool, and closes the door while saying:

“This didn’t happen, guards.”

The batponies salute as one.

“Yes, Commander!”

Inside, Sharp Biscuit taps his hoof against the floor, saying something very smart like the level-headed and intelligent batpony that he is:

“Huuuuh...”

“Yep,” Luna nods.

“It doesn’t look particularly dangerous. On the other hoof, *looking* isn’t the way to measure anything regarding a creature that can supposedly transform into anything.”

“My thoughts exactly, and I can’t waltz it into the laboratory in the dungeons and start doing experiments. I’m already neglecting my dreamwalking tonight.”

“And you are worried that it will attack you while you’re asleep, I take it?”

“Sharp, it crashed through my door, my protective spells, and it didn’t notice me repeatedly smacking its face with a rolled-up newspaper. Then it fell asleep in my bed with me still in it. As far as its motives are concerned, I have no stars-damned clue. Were you up for the attack?”

“I was. There was little to no strategy, just an incredible mass of bodies pushing through all of us. Speaking of which, if you need several... or several thousand samples, I can just ask. Both upper and lower Canterlot

are *filled* with them, crushed, burned, or killed in the aftermath of the love explosion.”

“Can you find any *alive* ones?” Luna raises an eyebrow, “I found this little one rolling on the floor with what looked to me like a splitting headache. I’d like one in a shape to talk, preferably.”

“With Paladins using everything at their disposal to do the same and do some ‘righteous purging’, as they say? We’re batponies, not unicorns.”

Luna sighs.

“There’s no talking to those fanatics...”

“You tell me,” Sharp Biscuit rolls his eyes, “Two years since your return and they still walk through our floors of the castle with garlic necklaces and, for reason I can’t understand, wooden crosses.”

“I still want you to give finding surviving changelings a try.”

“Of course, Luna. Do you mean me personally?”

“No, find Nightguards you can trust with this. If I wanted somepony to find a live changeling who would then ‘die of its wounds’ even if said wound was a stubbed hoof, I’d ask a Royal Guard unicorn. You’re going to stay here and keep an eye on us. My duties can’t remain neglected for long. The dream realm gets messy very quickly.”

“Give me an hour, Luna. I think I’ve got an idea.”

Author's Notes:

BOO!

NOTHING HAPPENED.

BOO, AUTHOR! BOO!

throws a tomato at the mirror

65536: 3

Even Luna must admit that she has significantly less *control* over the dream realm than anypony would expect from an alicorn whose aspect dreams are. What they fail to understand is that other alicorns are only specialized in certain aspects of the real world while she has an entire reality, or a mix of realities, to oversee. If the full extent of Luna's powers could transfer into the real world, she would easily be able to achieve things far beyond the capabilities of any reality warper throughout history.

What, however, is true is that she possesses the greatest *understanding* of the dreamscape and all the chaos within. Tonight, though, the dreamscape is almost still, stable and solid as a rock as the collective dreams of Canterlot ponies are locked on one and only one thing.

Collective nightmares, to be accurate.

"That's not your beloved!" Luna calls out, her voice muffled as a stallion kisses a changeling before collapsing, green mist coming off of him and feeding the creature.

Before she can stabilize the situation, it shifts, revealing the stallion awake and screaming inside a cocoon hanging from a Canterlot street lamp. There are hundreds of thousands more hanging everywhere, lying in the streets, or glued to the walls of dark buildings.

Luna was expecting this when she finally delved back into the dream realm, the second night after the invasion. Canterlot ponies survived a trauma beyond anything they encountered before and it was bound to leave mental scars. What she wasn't expecting was how powerful and *raw* everything would be when put together.

Changelings are swarming everywhere, hunting down screaming survivors and aided by mind-controlled ponies now addicted to changeling venom or... other ministrations.

“Yep... some of the captured ponies got rather *interesting* fantasies implanted in them,” Luna, hovering above the city, winces, “Oh my, that looks like their queen, judging by the size of her... everything. Is that an edible thong made of cake- SISTER?!”

“YOUSAWNOTHING!”

Somewhere in the real castle, Celestia bolts upright in her bed, sweat dripping from her forehead.

“I’ll never hear the end of this...” she sighs with absolute certainty.

Luna shakes her head but can’t help smirking as that particular vision vanishes. It’s not as if her sister is the only one with a dream like that right now. She should probably leave these fantasies alone for now and focus on the ones with claws and teeth... all hundreds of thousands of them. Her horn lights up and she starts blasting her way through the twisting and shifting version of Canterlot swarming with variations of changelings from the imagination of all the terrified ponies.

65536 yawns, its headache mostly gone, leaving behind only dull throbbing and some new words and concepts. Well, not exactly new, more like refreshed and recalled. The sleepy rectangle is a bed, the smaller head rectangle is a pillow, and the warm cover it’s tightly wrapped in is called a blanket. Blue- no, Luna is sleeping next to it, sometimes twitching, kicking, and gasping. After a rather powerful, full-body spasm, 65536 sits up, untangles itself from the blanket, shuffles over the treacherously soft bed to Luna’s neck, and nuzzles it.

“Don’t wake her up,” a new voice says something it can’t understand. Upon examination, it belongs to a grey pony with purple mane, yellow eyes, and wings that look like they belong to those creatures back in the hive that roost on the ceiling. 65536 can’t recall names or anything but some colors seem to be back. The headache grows worse again so the drone stops trying to focus on things that aren’t obvious.

65536 nudges Luna again and follows it by licking her cheek. The pony stands up, quietly and carefully walks around the bed, unceremoniously scoops the drone with one foreleg, and carries it away back to the armchair he's been sitting in.

“Do you understand me?” he says.

65536 stares, fascinated by his fangs. Something keeps telling it that ponies shouldn't have those, so it reaches out to touch the pony's muzzle. The pony pushes its foreleg down, leaving 65536 with only one option - try the other foreleg.

Same result.

65536 bares its fangs to show the strange pony who frowns and narrows his eyes. The emotions surrounding him shift from wary curiosity to something much colder which makes the drone close its mouth lower its head. That way it might not get eaten or sent into the crusher.

It grunts, more spikes of pain boring through its head as memories surface. This time, thankfully, they're related to the workings of the hive so they don't completely knock 65536 out.

In fact, the pain stops rather quickly after the initial shock. Why?

It finds itself curled up against the pony's chest, his forelegs wrapped tightly around it. There's no explicit *love* to feed on, ambient or otherwise, but the contact is helping anyway.

So warm...

As the drone nuzzles the pony's neck, darkness envelops it. It quickly looks around, only for its muzzle to bump into something leathery. It pushes its head through the less dark hole above and twists its neck...

...to see that it's wrapped in the pony's wings, the material of which still needs identifying the drone way.

Sharp Biscuit squints at the changeling currently nibbling on his wing. It's not biting down per-se, always stopping once the leathery skin gives in even a little. He bites his lip to fight the tickling sensation.

"Last time this happened to me, a friend's foal was teething," he mutters to himself. The changeling looks at him and after a second of absence of any punishment it returns to its chewing, "Is it possible that you are something like a changeling version of a foal? The witnesses I talked to earlier *did* say the changelings they fought were bigger and aggressive. Though the corpses in the streets... most of them looked like you. *Exactly* like you, to be frank. Hmmm... ouch!" his wing twitches as this time the changeling's bite must have pierced the skin around the wingbone.

The changeling gasps and immediately starts licking the bleeding spot, leaving behind a green, quickly-hardening film which, after a moment, starts feeling cool and numb.

Experimentally, Sharp spreads his wing and folds it again on his back while the changeling watches.

"You're an enigma..."

"Enema..." mumbles the changeling. Sharp's eyes go wide.

"Few of the ponies said you could talk..."

"Yu-ku-tok?"

Sharp shakes his head. The changeling lets out what even he can identify as a disappointed sigh. In response, he scratches it behind the ear.

The tip of its tongue plops out of its mouth. Sharp can't help poking it. The second he does it, the changeling's eyes light up and it boops his nose with a chitter.

"A breakthrough," he mutters.

"Abrfroo-" the changeling tries to imitate him and after spitting all over itself it paws at its mouth.

Sharp smiles. The changeling does so too and, like before, it reaches for the side of his muzzle. This time he lets the creature touch him, namely his fang. It bares its own fangs again.

“So this is what you wanted to do...” says Sharp, “We both have fangs, yes,” he nods, touching the side of the changeling’s muzzle in response. It smiles from ear to ear, “Though I must admit you have a *lot more* teeth than we do.”

“Denweedo...” mouths the changeling.

“I’ve got an idea. Might keep us occupied for tonight,” Sharp smirks, points at himself, and says clearly, “Sharp.”

“Shaaa,” replies the changeling.

“Sharp.”

“Shaaap?”

“Close, but no. Sharp.”

“Shargh?” the changeling scrunches its muzzle at its own attempt, “Sharp?”

The batpony nods with a smile and pats its head.

“Let’s try something advanced,” he points at the princess. Before he can say anything, though, the changeling chirps happily:

“Lu-na!”

“Heh, chalk it up to Luna to try this first,” he smirks, petting the changeling again.

A violent spasm turns Luna around and before Sharp can get a grip on the changeling, it slips from his grasp and bolts towards her. It jumps on the bed and bounces off so hard it lands on the floor on the other side. Before it can scramble to all fours, Sharp catches up and grabs it tight with one foreleg.

“Look, if you wake her up, you’ll do more harm than good. The nightmare needs to run its course as Luna steers it to a good end so that it doesn’t repeat and get worse over time,” he hisses at the changeling whose head keeps turning from him to Luna in confusion, “Trust me, this isn’t the first time something like this hap-”

Luna *screams*.

Her eyes shoot wide open and roll back as foam starts coming from her mouth. A black rift opens above her, somehow still clearly visible in the already unlit room to both the nocturnal batpony and the underground-dwelling changeling.

Something like the leg and a sharp blade of a praying mantis reaches out of it and-

Sharp Biscuit drops the changeling, tackling grabbing the bedsheet with its mouth and pouncing across the bed which rolls Luna off of it just as the blade stabs down. When Sharp looks up again, he sees the changeling hanging down from the limb coming from the rift by its teeth. Its foreleg flashes green and smacks against the blade which comes clean off. Another swing and the limb itself is cut off and the changeling drops on the bed with the limb still in its teeth.

The remains of the protruding limb retread back into the rift. Unceremoniously, Sharp Biscuit shoves Lune under the bed and looks at the door. The guards on the other side should already be trying to break it down. Why aren’t they?

He runs over. There’s no handle. He slams his hoof against it but it makes no noise.

It’s like being in a nightmare...

...but awake.

With nothing to lose, he flips the light switch next to the door.

The beautiful chandelier flares up...

...then its light fades into dim glow...

...and even that starts flickering.

A light brown stallion steps out of the black rift, his eyes pitch black holes into another universe, its mouth cracked open literally from ear to ear. It looks at the small changeling in front of it and buzzes like an insect crossed with a buzzsaw.

Something bulges under its skin like a maggot creeping under a sheet of paper, and more and more unseen *things* join in immediately, all crawling towards the “pony’s” mouth which opens wide, revealing yet another inky black hole just like its eyes.

The changeling doesn’t even try to stand up and begins scrambling and pushing itself away, its legs suddenly sinking into the soft bed as if it was quicksand. It keeps looking around, chittering loudly as it’s being swallowed into a depth which by all means shouldn’t exist.

Sharp grits his teeth, for some reason moving as if through knee-high tar. A nightmare.

A nightmare in the real world.

He passes by the changeling now up to its neck inside the bed and tackles the nightmarish pony back into the rift.

Seeing that, 65536 opens its mouth:

“Shaaaaaaaaaaa!”

With a jolt of its whole body, 65536 twitches and finds itself on the bed, completely un-swallowed, as if just waking up. However, the rift still hangs there and Sharp is nowhere to be found.

It quickly peeks under the bed to find still twitching Luna, grabs the not-Luna plushie from the floor, takes a deep breath...

...and jumps with it right into the rift.

Author's Notes:

rolls up newspaper

Bad head!

Make happy, not horror!

But-

smack

Happy!

But plot-

smack harder!

65536: 4

Dream after dream blend into one for Luna. She was expecting the situation but underestimated its magnitude. Changelings here, changeling there, swarms of them everywhere. Other than the hordes of chitinous monsters, the dreams have one more thing in common - Canterlot is ruined and burning in places. The princesses have failed, the ponies so used to peace are on their own.

Nopony is coming to save them, there's no light at the end of the tunnel, no hope.

Roughly a million ponies combined live in lower and upper Canterlot and the vast majority dream only about one thing tonight, and Luna finds herself overwhelmed. Even she, the protector of dreams, has to retreat.

Her form disappears from the sky above Canterlot and the ball of changelings surrounding her descends on the city again.

When she opens her eyes, she finds herself among the crowd of a filled high school auditorium, listening to the stuttering of a colt who is for some reason wearing white boxers.

"Ahhh," she breathes out, "The classic."

She just needs to take a breath, that's all, and then she'll go right back.

Sharp Biscuit finds himself in some underground hallway similar to the maintenance tunnels of Canterlot sewers. A quick check reveals he's wearing his light armor as well as the standard Nightguard combat horseshoes.

Tap tap tap

The pipes?

He touches the pipes lining the wall next to him. No, they seem solid, nothing is shaking under the pressure of steam.

Tap tap

He puts his ear to the warm pipe.

His batpony hearing catches the faintest scratch of something on the floor behind him.

Metal blades slide out of his horseshoes as he turns around to face a pony with scarred and twisted face wearing a brimmed hat and a sweater. Metal claws protrude from his hooves, which he raises and gives Sharp an evil grin.

A grin which suddenly gets significantly wider as the commander of the Nightguard swipes his foreleg at him.

“I never like that movie, Krumare,” Sharp smirks, “Too many plot holes. Also, you’re a stallion,” he lowers his head to look between Krumare’s hind legs, “Or are you?”

The nightmarish pony lunges at him with a growl, flailing his bladed forelegs furiously. Of course, bull rushing a soldier trained in close combat works about as well as expected, and Krumare finds himself on the floor, his fetlock hacked off by Sharp’s combat blades as the batpony dodges his lunge with a quick pirouette.

Sharp steps on Krumare’s back and casually flicks his hat off before ramming his horseshoe blades directly down, severing Krumare’s spine. The pony melts like liquid, vanishing into the floor.

“Now, if I recall correctly, this shouldn’t be the end of it,” Sharp mutters to himself, heading forward through the familiar hallway, “So, either the Nightmare movie was based on a true story, which means all the ponies in it

suffered serious concussion beforehoof, or... or the rift somehow connected the real world to the dreamscape.”

“RAAARGH- oh buck!” Krumare’s raspy voice gets cut off along with his foreleg reaching through the wall to stab Sharp.

“Do you mind? I’m trying to *think* here,” the batpony replies in an annoyed tone, “Seriously, you as a nightmare only work when ponies don’t think, have zero combat training, aren’t armed, and can’t control themselves in a dream.”

Krumare materializes behind Sharp, charges at him again, and promptly finds himself tripped and body-slammed into the floor head first with a loud snap.

“Speaking of which, why *can* I behave like in the real world?” Sharp Biscuit steps over the nightmare pony with his neck snapped in a ninety-degree angle before kicking him with his hind leg for good measure, “Could it be because of Luna being around? Maybe the connection to the real world might have something to do with it.”

His hopes come true as he finds a metal ladder leading to a hatch at a spot corresponding for the real Canterlot castle. With utmost care, he opens it and peeks into the familiar white and gold hallway as screams of horror and battle trickle in.

“Alrighty,” he climbs out, darts towards the nearest window, and immediately hides under the sill as he sees a mass of black bodies push against a line of Royal Guards, teeth gnashing and claws swiping, “I don’t recall it being *this bad*,” he mutters to himself, “And after seeing Luna’s little changeling in action I’m pretty sure we saw them as much more terrifying than they really were.”

He blinks in realization.

“This is *their* exaggeration, *their* nightmare,” the corner of his mouth curls up, “Up yours, Shining Armor. I knew my Nightguards were much better trained than your Royals.”

A window nearby shatters as changelings stream in, hissing and chittering. Dozens of unblinking teal eyes turn towards Sharp, and mouths filled with buzzsaw-like teeth open.

“That’s not how they really look-” Sharp stops himself, “That’s how *they* remember them. Crap,” he turns away and bolts, followed by angry buzzing suddenly drowning out all other noise.

“NIGHTGUAAAARDS!” he screams from the top of his lungs, hoping for some support from the *properly* trained ponies protecting the castle.

Nothing. No response. Only the changeling buzzing behind him.

Right... because we are just Luna’s ceremonial bodyguard and the invasion happened during the day. They got overwhelmed and didn’t see the few of us halt the advance of the horde through the upper floors. They don’t even think we were there.

Of course, Luna sleeping through the whole thing can’t have helped.

He kicks open the door of the throne room, revealing only more hallway and Krumare laughing at him. The laughter stops abruptly as Sharp grabs the pony, kicks his forelegs, and guides his fall into a stumble towards the following horde of changelings.

The real throne room door appears in front of him as Krumare’s panicked screaming ends up in a high-pitched screech of agony.

He enters just in time to see Luna blast a tall changeling mare with a jagged black horn with a beam of light, the changeling shattering like glass and disappearing. Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to have any effect on princess Celestia hanging in a green cocoon from the ceiling, nor Shining Armor and Cadance staring blankly head, not even several other ponies scattered around the throne room, all glued to the floor with green goo.

“Sharp Biscuit!” Luna’s eyes stop on him, “We must escape! The nightmare is too powerful, We cannot wake up.”

We?

“There’s some kind of rift down in the maintenance tunnels,” he responds instinctively, “It let some weird horror pony through into your suite but the changeling and I stopped it.”

“You *must* lead Us there!” Luna trots over to him.

“Can’t you sense it?” Sharp furrows his brows, “Dreamscape is your-”

“Too many ponies are dreaming about the same thing, and *are horrified* by the same thing. We weren’t ready for this. We need help,” Luna grits her teeth, “Come ON!”

“There’s an infinite horde of changelings between us and the maintenance hatch I used.”

“We can deal with them, that much is still in Our power at least!” Luna rushes out of the throne room into a strangely empty hallway, “It seems that fortune is finally smiling on Us!”

As the battle outside rages on, the two trot through the halls until Sharp stops by a pillar behind which there’s the cleverly hidden hatch disguised as a big floor tile.

“This one, Luna,” he turns to face the princess...

...only to see a pair of slit, green eyes, the look into which makes him lose all control of his legs.

The changeling queen laughs as she kicks his limp body aside.

“You served me well, pathetic worm,” she says in a haughty tone undercut by changeling buzzing as the horde swarms around Sharp again, “For that, you will get to live, to see the nightmares given life until you break down like those other weak ponies outside.”

This is just a reflection, dream creatures don’t have a mind of their own, do they? Damn, I wish Luna shared more details about her job. And if this is a

reflection and she pretended to be her... do some ponies think LUNA was behind the invasion?!

The changeling queen's head transforms into Luna's, although the sadistic grin clashes with Sharp's view of the real princess.

"This beautiful nightmare will soon become reality," she rips out the hatch and climbs inside, followed by the buzzing horde.

Buck... I knew Luna never used the royal We around me and I still lost my cool under pressure and didn't think clearly.

Luna returns into the collective nightmare, appearing in the air above upper Canterlot. All ponies are gone by now, replaced by cocoons in which they open their mouths in silent screams for help.

That, in itself, wouldn't be a problem, no matter how horrifying it sounds. Even the worst nightmares need time to affect individuals in a way threatening their mental health. The *real* problem is that by now she can *feel* the fabric of dreamscape unravel as *something* is trying to get into the waking world. Her magic should be making this impossible but the pressure the changeling invasion put on the peaceful ponies was simply too much for them to handle.

She begins blasting the swarm of changelings under her flowing like a black, shiny river towards the castle. No matter the losses, they pay her no mind. This isn't her first rodeo, though.

Realizing she can't stop the endless horde, she teleports down and begins blasting the cocoons. Ponies need relief, they need their dreams to end well even if the content is too much for her to control at the moment.

Doing so, however, makes the horde slow down and eventually turn around with furious buzzing. Refreshed from her retreat into dreams of those unaffected by the invasion, Luna braces herself for another round of battle, this time with a plan.

The ponies she releases disappear, waking up in cold sweat but with the knowledge that their princess is still holding a protecting hoof over them, and that knowledge fills Luna with determination and the power to keep going.

At that moment, though, she senses two intrusions into the dreamscape from the real world and panics.

“This shouldn’t be!” she blasts her way into the sky through the swarm. On the momentarily clear horizon, she sees the mouth of a towering equine creature made of stars and galaxies. She grits her teeth, “Tantabus...”

She loses the line of sight as the changelings swarm around her again, bashing against the magical barrier surrounding her.

Two real-world creatures are now in this nightmare with me and I can't help them...

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
A!”

The deafening burst of laughter is accompanied by rumbling and a loud crash which makes the swarm stop and look as one towards the castle. She uses the moment to blast her way up again and freezes in the air once she gets a clear view.

“What...?” the princess of dreams’ jaw drops.

Back inside the castle, Sharp Biscuit shakes off the layer of dust and debris, staring in disbelief at a gargantuan wall of white in front of him which must have broken through the castle roof, all of its floors, and unless the fake Luna was made of some dreamscape unobtainium, through the maintenance level and her as well. For no believable reason it smells like... candy?

Luna simply hovers, not even flapping her wings, staring in confusion at what looks like a *qiqantic* Celestia.

No... a skyscraper-sized *plushie* of Celestia, and inside a small crow's nest akin to that of a ship just on the tip of the plush toy's horn...

“HA HA HA HAAAAA! I AM RIDING THE MARSHMALLOW PRINCESS FULL OF WARM AND HAPPY! I WIN THE HIGH SCOOOOORE! SUCK IT, 11581!”

“...changeling...?”

“HAHAHAHAHAHA! NO HIGH RANK IS GONNA EAT ME NOW! NOT EVEN A NIBBLE!”

65536 takes a bite off of the marshmallow horn and points towards the swarm of changelings.

“IT’S REVENGE OF THE DRONES, YOU SMARMY INFILTRATORS! NOT-BLUE, FIREEEEEEEEE!”

“FIRING MAIN CANNON!” replies giant Celestia in a rumbling voice as her eyes light up with emerald fire.

A wave of green light disintegrates the ball of changelings surrounding Luna while leaving her unharmed.

“BOOOOOOOOM!” yells the changeling excitedly, “NICE SHOT, NOT-BLUE!” it turns around in its crow’s nest and spots the strange cracked face of Tantabus on the horizon, “OOOOH BIG BAD IN THE SKY, NOT-BLUE!”

“FIRING ALL CANNONS!” marshmallow Celestia opens her mouth, adding a third green beam to the eye lasers.

“WOOOOOOOO! DIRECT HIT!”

Luna senses the city waking up from the sheer absurdity of their nightmare turning into... well, *this*.

She can still feel the tantabus creeping through the dreamscape but without the collective nightmare to draw its power from it is forced to retreat. As

pony after pony leaves the dream and reaches for a glass of water or warm milk, Luna can finally take a breath of relief and, with a flash of her horn, the nightmare ends.

For tonight, of course. This battle is won but the war is far from over.

She blinks, tries to sit up, and curses when she hits her muzzle on something.

“Luna!” she hears Sharp Biscuit and grabs his foreleg reaching towards her.

“What was I doing under the bed?” she asks once the batpony helps the princess untangle herself from the blanket.

“A rift appeared and some monstrosity crawled out of it,” he keeps looking around for any sign of trouble. However, the chandelier isn’t blinking anymore and the foreign tension in the air is gone, “First, there was this weird claw which tried to stab you so I got you out of the way, the changeling punched it off, and then an equine-looking monster that I tackled back into the rift and-”

“And you landed in the dreamscape. I sensed two intrusions, though, so the changeling followed you... riding a giant marshmallow Celestia plushie that shot green magic beams.”

Sharp just stares at her until...

Until the changeling sleeping with a wide grin on its face and hugging the plushie’s back kicks its hind leg, and mumbles:

“...booom...!”

Author's Notes:

Well...

...this happened.

156, 387: 4

Hmmm, no hostilities yet...

1988 quietly follows the pony carrying 9999 through the forest. So far, it seems that the ponies working around here haven't received the news about the changeling invasion of Canterlot, nor the following takeover of Riverside.

Rustle rustle

As an infiltrator, albeit one of a rather low rank, 1988 has enough self-control to barely twitch his ear at the noise, and he keeps following the duo, carefully stepping over branches and using the soft grass to mask his hoofsteps.

Rustle

Whoever or whatever is following him is far from being as stealthy, but openly looking around would certainly lead to the situation escalating and, no matter what anyone might say, without a good supply of love, infiltrators aren't that much better at fighting than drones, mostly due to being even more fragile.

Following the trampled path leading north, 9999 keeps riding on the axe pony's back and turning its head like a lighthouse.

"Oooh! Why is that tree white and striped?"

"It's a zebra tree," replies the pony.

"Neeeeeat!" 9999 grins.

In the safe distance, 1988 facehoofs.

“Hey, that tree tripped and fell over!” 9999 points ahead into the distance as loud rumbling cuts through the otherwise quiet forest.

“Good eyes,” the axe pony nods.

“Thanks, I hatched with those!”

The pony takes a deep breath, prepping to say something before simply shaking his head and breathing out.

“So what were you doing back there with your friend?” asks 9999.

“Getting the felled trees ready for transport,” replies the axe pony, “We cut down the trees, chop the branches off, and drag them to the camp.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

“Do the trees... taste good?” 9999’s eyes go wide as he adds with suspicion, “Has 36658 been right all along?”

“Uhhh, we don’t *eat* wood, we make stuff from it. Houses, furniture, too many things to name.”

“Really? Those I saw in that city on the side of the mountain were made of this weird rock-non-rock.”

“Side of the... do you mean Canterlot?”

Hearing that, 1988’s eyes go wide as he forces open a hive link into 9999’s head and screams mentally:

“DON’T TELL THEM WE ATTACKED THEIR CAPITAL CITY, YOU IDIOT!”

He definitely wasn’t expecting the following bout of nausea that sends him to his knees and then on the forest floor. Too little love for too long.

9999 bolts upright from his casual lounging position on the axe pony's back, quickly thinking of solutions.

"N-Nooo..." he says carefully, "It wasn't *that*, it was... umm... Can-umm-little, yeah Canumlittle. And everything there wasn't from gold and those weird fake rocks I wasn't just talking about."

Yesss, saved!

"So..." the axe pony slows down, "What were you doing in that Can- not- Canterlot?"

"Oh? We flew in, landed on a roof, crawled through a hole leading into this house thing, we came out completely covered in black stuff. 55648 even found a singing box! Oh! And I found a button that made a ball shiny, that was *awesome*! We could look at it for hours but those spiky ponies were coming so we had to crawl back out through the hole to the roof."

"Spiky ponies?"

"Yeah, they were wearing shiny gold carapaces and had a pointy pokey thing each."

"Royal Guards?" the axe pony slows down even more, turning his head and giving 9999 a narrow-eyed look.

"I dunno," the drone shrugs, "I didn't stop to ask who they guarded," it scratches its head, "Wait, royal, do you have a queen too? Our is kinda..." it lowers its voice, "umm, mean," it quickly looks around and breathes out in the absence of any immediate punishment.

"We have a princess- well, we *had* a princess, now we have two."

"Do you like them?"

"They're alright," the axe pony shrugs, "Celestia has been around for a long time and things have never been *too* bad, and while I don't know much about her sister Luna but I haven't heard anything really bad."

“Yay, then the princess has been doubled!” 9999 exclaims.

“So, about not-Canterlot...” he nods to 9999.

“Oh yeah,” its eyes light up in excitement again, “Did you know there were these shiny things in the streets that are filled with tiny glowing bugs?”

“You mean the firefly street lamps?”

“Do I? I dunno, they just go flutterflutterflutterflutter all around and I could watch those *forever*! Shiny inside-ball was neat but these were... something else.”

The axe pony sighs.

“Yes, you do mean those. What I was asking, though, was what you were doing in Canter- uhh, not.”

“Oh yeah,” 9999 chuckles, “Well, after we escaped the spiky ponies, we snuck into this huuuuge house filled with bubbling, colorful stuff. We had to be super sneaky because there were magic ponies outside controlling this massive granite pony that kept stomping and kicking the high ranks around. 23119 drank something smoking from a bottle and started spitting fire. It said that with the ability to do something like that, it would beat the high score for sure, buuut... then its holes started smoking,” 9999 presents the holes in his legs, “And then its everything started smoking, and then it hiccuped and everything went white and hurty. Not sure what happened to it, because when I woke up, everything was dark and I had to dig myself out from the rubble. The magic ponies were gone, the house was in ruins, and everything was on fire.”

“You... set fire to Cant- not-Canterlot?”

“Not me, 23119 did that and it was an accident,” 9999 raises its forelegs defensively.

“Alright, I understand,” the pony simply keeps looking at the drone instead of moving ahead, “And what did you do next?”

“I got orders to fly to the castle and help. There was a group of those spiky ponies whom the warriors couldn’t deal with, so they needed us drones to push through their defense. I didn’t even have the time to get some love from the gooped ponies in the streets,” 9999 pouts, “Then I saw it from the sky. There was this orange horny pony with floating swords just hacking away. Cool as hole, really!”

“Wait, you know what a sword is but you call a spear ‘the pointy stick’?”

“Eheheh,” 9999 scratches his head nervously, “47773 found one in the streets but a warrior told him what it was and it wanted it... and 47773 said no, that it found it and that it was shiny and that it wanted to take it home and trade it for 22997’s old helmet because it was supposed to be digging a new hatchery in an unstable area,” 9999 sighs, “Didn’t end well...”

“Sorry to hear that.”

9999 shrugs.

“It happens. We drones can’t do much about it. Anyway, I didn’t even get to join the others fighting the horny pony and his group because everything went pink and we were all sent rocketing away,” it wistfully looks backwards, “The Canlittle-not was so pretty... I wish I could see it again.”

“Uh huh...” the axe pony frowns, processing the creature’s statements, “So... *why* did you go to not-Canterlot?”

“We were hungry back home all the time and the queen said that ponies are super loving creatures and that we would have all the love we could eat.”

No problem. Didn’t say a word about us attacking the city. This infiltration stuff is easy!

“Wait, you *eat* love? How does one eat an emotion?”

“Umm, you have to ask that one of the high ranks. We drones just dig and carry stuff around and... and... we...” it clutches its head, suddenly drawing blanks where pony words used to be, “No... bad... back. Nothing. Empty,”

gritting its teeth, 9999 starts frantically pointing backwards, “Back. Must. Back. Empty.”

“What?”

“Back! Axe. Pony. Walk.”

Despite confusion and paranoia mounting, the pony turns around and follows the trail back. So far, several things are clear. One - the creature isn't alone, or wasn't. Likely isn't, because it said it was supposed to show itself to them. Two - it was in Canterlot, and recently, and *probably* caused some trouble. Three - it's not that smart and right now it seems equally as confused by the turn of events as he is.

9999 suddenly jumps off of the axe pony's back and bolts into the undergrowth.

“Hey!” the axe pony calls out, stomping after it.

A moment later, he finds the creature near a second one lying on the ground the size and rough shape of an adult mare, nudging her with its muzzle and trying to shake her awake to no avail.

As the pony approaches, the small creature growls at him and bares its fangs.

“I don't know what's going on but I'm not going to hurt either of you, okay?” he says.

“Bad. Help.” 9999 is grasping for words it can still recall, growing angry at itself for failing to convey any coherent message. It leans down to 1988's muzzle and starts licking it.

Axe pony leans close as well, puts his ear to the mouth of the possibly adult and female version of the critter, and frowns when he feels no breath tickle him. If this is connected to the small one's sudden loss of speech, whatever happened here must have happened recently.

“Okay, okay. Resuscitation it is then,” he pushes the small one away, “Stay clear, keep an eye out on any danger,” he says, hoping it can still at least understand him.

9999 starts to chitter and buzz as it sees the axe pony sit on 1988’s barrel and start repeatedly pressing down with his forelegs so hard 1988’s carapace cracks. It gets ready to bite the pony to at least convey the message that this is wrong, opens its mouth...

...and then the pony leans down and kisses 1988.

9999 pauses.

More pushing down, cracking, and visible hurting.

Another kiss.

Over and over and over.

9999 has no clue what to make of it.

Until, that is, 1988’s eyes bulge and he starts gasping for breath and coughing.

The axe pony stands up, looks at the small one, and can’t dodge the buggy bullet as the now crying critter launches itself at his neck and starts hugging and nuzzling every place it can reach, smearing green snot all over his coat. He sits down and pats its head, not letting his eyes leave the adult one staring ahead with her eyes wide open.

“There there...”

As the adult one manages to shakily sit up, she looks around in clear panic before her eyes settle on the pony.

“What... where is it...?” she whispers.

“Where’s what?” asks the pony.

“The... the *thing* that jumped me. It *looked* like a changeling but... but...” her thousand-yard stare returns, “It *wasn't* one.”

“Miss, I have no idea what you saw but you can thank the little one for bringing me to you immediately. You weren't breathing and your heart stopped.”

“I...” 1988 reaches for his chest and touches the *deep* spider web of cracks there, “Why did you help me?” he asks.

“I couldn't just leave a lady lying dead in the middle of nowhere. What sort of a question is that?” the axe pony furrows his brows.

1988 tries to make sense of the situation. It's just him and 9999, the others are who-knows-where by now. He *could* go find them and warn them about the... thing but that would either mean he would have to lead the pony to them or that he would have to walk through the forest... *alone*.

He shudders.

No, we're here, we have a mission, and I sure as hole am not walking around on my own in case there are more of the damn creatures.

So... the pony didn't slit my throat with that forester knife on his belt. 9999 is shaken but unhurt. 156 and 387 were right, the logging camp must be behind on the news about Canterlot.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, 1988 offers a hoof for the pony to shake.

“I'm 1988, that's 9999, in case it didn't tell you already.”

“Hacksmith,” replies the pony, “From Central Stalliongrad logging company. Miss, if you don't mind me asking, why do you refer to yourself with numbers?”

“I'm a stallion,” 1988 scores a small victory as he sees the earth pony twitch. Another why-boner experience just like during the preparations in Canterlot, “Don't worry, I get that a lot. As for the numbers, it's just how

our species works, that's all. 9999, stop hanging around mister Hacksmith's neck and slobbering all over him."

"Sorry," 9999 drops, "I was just so happy mister Hacksmith helped you get better. What happened, anyway? Why aren't you with the others?"

"Others?" asks Hacksmith.

1988's eye twitches.

Well done revealing that there are more of us the second you open your mouth...

"We're not keen on pitchforks and torches on sight," he says carefully, "Our occasional contact with other species rarely ended well," he shows his fangs, sharper and longer than 9999's, "9999 was sent here to see how you'd react to the sight of us."

"I think he's rather friendly."

"It."

"Hmm?"

"Drones are genderless," 1988 corrects him.

"Why are *you* here, anyway, 1988?" asks 9999.

"Keeping an eye on you in case of trouble, obviously," 1988 rolls his eyes, "And making sure you can still speak and understand ponish."

"So he stopped being able to talk because you..." Hacksmith pauses, "What *did* happen to you, actually?"

1988 shivers.

"Can we talk about it somewhere... *safer*?"

"I was just bringing 99... 99?"

“Yup! Right on the first try!” the drone beams at him.

“To the main camp to see the foreman,” Hacksmith can’t help patting his head again. This drone creature just seems inherently huggable.

“Mind if I tag along?” asks 1988, “I could keep my distance, but... after what happened I’d rather not be alone around here anymore.”

“Anything specific we should keep an eye on?” asks 9999.

“It looked like a changeling but... hollow,” 1988 grits his teeth, “As if something was *wearing* a changeling carapace and you could see smaller things... squirming under it,” he looks around as the wind whispers through the canopy, “I don’t want to be out here in the open after dark,” to Hacksmith he adds, “Keep that knife ready.”

Author's Notes:

Ayy, both first stories are over, the stage is set, the tone of horror and cuteness is weird, and implications for the bigger world are forming. Now's probably the best time to say what's turning out right, wrong, what feels good, what's hard to read and so on before I start working on more.

Progress:

65536 aka 'little disaster' saved Luna and Sharp Biscuit from the dream realm.

9999, 1988 successfully made non-hostile contact with ponies.

Also, it's a *fact* that changeling drones would make the best pets ever.

Next part - god knows when. I've been neglecting One Hug Bug for some two weeks now and need to write some buffer again.

65536: 5

“You know, Luna... you could use a shower,” Sharp Biscuit smirks as he sniffs the heavy and stale air of the princess’ suite. Then he wipes his forehead, “Huh, and so could I.”

Luna looks behind herself at the sheets *drenched* with fresh sweat from the nightmare they’ve just escaped and takes a long breath before sticking her tongue out, “Bleh... you’re absolutely right. It’s not just us, though,” she glances at the drone sleeping on its back and firmly biting down on plush Celestia’s foreleg.

“How did you not notice it earlier?”

“There were more pressing matters at hoof!” Luna huffs indignantly, “Now shoo! And tell the serva- no,” she stops herself. Revealing a live changeling to castle staff would be a terrible idea, no doubt, “Hmph, it seems that I have to ask for a favor-”

“I’ll get the fresh sheets, don’t worry,” Sharp smiles, sniffs the air, and winces, “Possibly some air-freshener, and...” he looks at the changeling, “You know, that buggo could use a bath too.”

The changeling suddenly sits upright, looking around in visible panic and hugging Not-Blue. When its eyes stop on Luna, Sharp, and nothing else in the room, it visibly relaxes and breathes out.

“Thanks, Sharp.”

The Nightguard commander turns around.

“Shaaa!” 65536 gives him a wave, finally letting go of the now irreparably ruined plushie.

He waves back and leaves.

Luna wrinkles her nose. Now that Sharp pointed it out, she can't get the assault of stench on her nostrils out of her mind. Come to think of it, the part of her bed where the changeling was sleeping is a crusty mess of caked dust, lint, green goo, and chitin shards.

"Ewww. You stay there," she pats 65536's head and points at its spot. The changeling puffs out its chest and remains solid as a rock.

Luna wipes her hoof on the sheet, rushes to the window, and opens it wide while shoving her head outside and taking in the sweet lungfuls of fresh air. The warm late summer night wind does wonders to wash away the uneasiness of the recent nightmare, and Luna soon hatches a plan for the few remaining hours of this horrible night.

With 65536 still sitting in its spot, Luna leaves the window open, walks over to the bathroom where she proceeds to draw a bath. She desperately wants to take a shower but doing so would be pointless before cleaning the ball of smelly mess that's 65536. Splashing some cold water in her face, though, is definitely a step number one.

Sharp returns soon with a load of fresh, clean laundry, and unloads the messy stuff on Luna's bed onto the two guards always standing outside of the suite.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"I need you to stay here. I've got an idea but I'm going to need you. First, though, it's bath time."

"Oh my, you require such *personal* services from me?" Sharp smirks.

Luna rolls her eyes, her horn lights up, and her telekinetic grip levitates up the changeling whom she shoves directly on Sharp's back.

"There you go, trash collector."

65536 hugs the back of Sharp's neck.

"Does this go into paper, plastic, or glass?" he asks, unfazed.

“Bathtub,” she nods towards the bathroom and follows him there.

The bath is full by now, foam and bubbles casually floating above the water surface.

Sharp furrows his brows.

“You know, this might not be the best-”

“In you go, you disgusting little ball,” Luna telekinetically plucks 65536 off of Sharp’s back and tosses it into the tub.

“HISS- BLUBLUBLUBLUULBUBBLBLBLBL!”

“So, Luna, what have we learned?” asks Sharp bleeding from his neck with clumps of his coat missing.

“Don’t throw a changeling half the size of a normal pony into a walk-in tub big enough to fit an alicorn filled to the brim with water?”

“That,” he nods, “and also don’t send your personal bodyguard to physically fish it out when you can levitate things.”

“Sorry, I panicked,” says Luna sheepishly, “Also, it’s a lot more difficult to grab something that doesn’t want to be grabbed.”

“Alicorn...”

“I said more difficult, not *too* difficult,” Luna looks upwards where 65536 is hanging upside down, its hooves glued to the ceiling, It catches Luna’s eyes and-

“...hissssss!”

Sharp grumbles something to himself and swabs the bleeding spots with a freshly disinfected piece of cloth.

“Also that the holes in their legs make it really difficult to swim,” she adds.

“If I catch some yet unidentified infection, I want you to know that I might add a sun-based decoration to my official armor.”

“Don’t say things you might not be able to take back!” Luna gasps.

“Filling my application to join the paladins the first thing tomorrow.”

“TRAITOR!” Luna splashes some water from the tub at him.

“Ewww,” Sharp winces, “It was in there for just a few seconds and now the water is *rancid*. How about you draw a fresh bath and lure it back down while I get the bleach and wire scrubber from the kitchens? Perhaps an amount in which it can comfortably stand.”

He leaves again.

“Alright, you little disaster, get down from there.”

“HISSSS!”

Luna sighs, lets the bath drain, and starts scrubbing.

65536’s head has been feeling progressively heavier and heavier for the past few minutes as it watches Luna scrub the artificial pool she tried to drown it in before. Thankfully, Sharp pulled it out and wasn’t even *too* angry about the panicked bites, scratches, and bruises 65536 left all over him.

It carefully buzzes its wings, twists itself to lick and dissolve the goo bonds keeping its hooves glued to the ceiling, and fights a bout of dizziness after it spins in the air to be the right way up.

It realizes its mistake as the nefarious blue shimmer of Luna’s telekinesis wraps around it again. Flailing its legs ineffectively in the air, it tries to kick itself off of the water surface and hits the hard porcelain bottom.

“Stop!” Luna makes it face her. 65536 doesn’t understand her but her angry face makes its ears splay back. Her expression softens as the changeling tries to make itself look as small as possible and she slowly lowers the now limp drone down right to the water level.

And lower, and lower.

65536’s legs touch the bottom, it opens its eyes, and realizes the water is only fetlock-high and that Luna stopped more water from coming in from a silver pipe-thingy coming out of the wall.

It takes a hesitant step, slips, and flops on its belly.

The unusually warm water is still reaching barely to its muzzle. It smells weird too, not bad but weird. Kinda... kinda like Luna, in fact.

“What’s taking Sharp so long?” mutters Luna, eager to get going because she’s not sure how long the changeling is going to stay still.

65536 submerges its foreleg into the shallow water, raises it, and watches it drain out of its leg holes.

It tickles.

Concluding that this requires more testing, 65536 reaches for the water pipe thingy and starts prodding its many moving parts.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeee!”

With a bucket of cleaning products in his mouth, Sharp peeks into the bathroom, confused by the quiet yet high-pitched mix of buzzing and screeching making his bat ears twitch.

“What went wrong n- huuuuh?”

“It’s been doing that for the past five minutes,” Luna shrugs, “Since it figured out how the shower works.”

The changeling is sitting under a stream of water, forelegs and its strange hole-y wings spread, and its eyes open wide, seemingly not minding the stream of water whatsoever.

“Well, at least it’s doing most of the cleaning work for us.”

“It still didn’t figure out how to make the water warm, so get in and start scrubbing while I fix the abomination that’s my bed,” Luna flashes Sharp a smile which makes him roll his eyes and walk into the bathtub which is in reality more a small pool.

“Shaaa- blubblblblblblb!” 65536 opens its mouth to greet the batpony and immediately starts coughing out water. During its fit, Sharp turns the shower off and looks down at the murky grey pool he’s sitting in.

Once the changeling stops choking, it longingly looks up at the shower nozzle again. Sharp turns it on again but this time it’s not lukewarm but hot in order to get rid of the mess caked on the changeling’s carapace. Wisely, he opts against the bottle of bleach in his bucket, grabs the liquid soap and a sponge, and gets to work.

It’s slow but works well, at least until he gets to the changeling’s leg holes.

“Eeeeeee!”

It goes quiet when Sharp stops pushing the sponge through, looking at him with a wide smile. He moves onto the next hole.

“Eeeeeeeee!”

“It certainly doesn’t seem like you hate it,” he comments, earning a quizzical look quickly replaced by more buzz-screeching.

Contrary to his own experience, the reports Sharp heard from the Nightguards, and the nightmare he visited, this changeling is far from the sawtoothed feral beast. In fact, it’s more like a... foal?

Sharp soaps up the sponge and the changeling’s leg hole again, and asks:

“Wanna see something?”

“Bzzzzt?”

He grabs its leg and blows into the hole, releasing a stream of soap bubbles.

65536’s jaw drops and its eyes go saucer-wide.

Shiver runs down Luna’s spine as the buzzing suddenly goes drastically louder. Expecting another mishap, she bolts into the bathroom.

“MWAHAHAHAHAAAA! Revenge is mine,” laughs Sharp, aiming soaped-up 65536 at her, “FIRE IN THE HOLE, BUGGO!”

The changeling raises its forelegs, blows, and Luna’s world drowns in bubbles.

Author's Notes:

Plot?

NOT THIS TIME!

65536: 6

“Once again, what have we learned?” asks Sharp with a smug smirk.

The red-eyed alicorn gives him a bloodshot look.

“That bad batponies get sent to the moon along with their changeling friends?” she grumbles.

“Aww, come on,” Sharp turns his head to 65536 unsuccessfully attempting to blow bubbles out of his now clean and soap-less leg holes, “You win some, you lose some. Now you’re both squeaky clean, everything has calmed down, and other than that wet plush likeness of Celestia everything is fine.”

“It’s not fine, Sharp, that’s the problem,” Luna sighs, “From what you told me, it’s clear that the trauma ponies suffered from the invasion was so powerful that certain inhabitants of the dreamscape were able to get out into the real world. From my experience, it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

“Oh,” Sharp hesitates, “So, for the record, you’re not all grumpy because we bubbled the everliving moonlight out of you until you cried?”

“Having a sentient bubble blower is an advantage that not even alicorn magic can overcome,” she shrugs, “No, you won fair and square, but you being a sore winner and not shutting up is a one-way ticket to the Badlands.”

“Why the Badlands?”

“Didn’t you hear the theory that Celestia faked sending me to the moon there?”

“I did, actually. From the same kind of ponies who think Equus is donut-shaped and rides on the backs of four giant llamas standing on an even

bigger blobfish floating in space,” Sharp shakes his head, “So what’s the big deal with the dreamscape creatures? My experience with Krumare was less than impressive and little buggo here punched off that weird bladed leg poking from the rift as if it was nothing.”

“That’s what worries me the most...” Luna looks at the changeling currently amusing itself by shoving Sharp’s short mane through its leg holes and quietly buzzing and chittering to itself, “If I’m not making a complete miscalculation, the thing attempting to hurt me was a dreamweaver. They are among the most dangerous dreamscape beings who, when they get out, are invulnerable to most mundane means. I have *zero* idea why a common changeling would be able to harm it without a problem. Normally, you would need weapons enchanted with complex magic, something on the level of paladin grandmaster relics or the items locked in the castle’s main vault.”

“And Krumare? In the movies he’s pretty much invincible to anything other than plot holes.”

Luna shrugs.

“It really depends on the dreamer who brought it up but inside the dreamscape they are possible to banish or hurt. It’s the real world that’s the problem. The natural divine power of my aspect usually makes an incursion like this impossible but in the light of recent events...” she lowers her head, “I’ve allowed myself to become weak, unfocused. If I was in my prime, I’d be able to hold the horrors inside on my own.”

“Or you might attempt to usher eternal night again, Luna,” Sharp pulls her into a hug, “It doesn’t matter whether this happened because you are too weak now, because the ponies are softer than before your banishment, or because the threat of the changelings being able to replace anyone is just too much. We are here, your guards are here, and Equestria is still here,” he lets go and boops her as she leans back, “So, Moonpie, what do we do now?”

Luna looks firmly at the changeling who, seeing attention focusing on it again, gives her a happy smile.

“The changeling was able to talk in the dreamscape, yet it’s unable to do so now. It’s either playing the long game and pretending it doesn’t even understand us at all or it can’t do that either. The answers are in the dreamscape, and I have to find them before tomorrow night when all this is going to happen again, likely to a worse degree.”

Knocking on the door makes all three turn their heads.

Sharp drops the changeling on the bed and peeks outside. After a few hushed words, he lets a blond-maned head of a bronze unicorn peek inside. 65536 waves at him, eagerly waiting for an answer which doesn’t come.

“Princess,” says the unicorn, “We found one - a brothel worker. It- she seems to be well-liked by all her coworkers. On top of that, one of her friends seems to know a high-ranked Royal Guard who knew about the changeling before and vouched for them both. I could use your truth-telling ability to figure out if it’s not just a long con.”

Shaking her head, Luna points at Sharp.

“You have a good instinct for lies, Blazing. Take Sharp with you and interrogate the changeling. I have something more pressing on my plate right now,” she nods her head towards 65536.

“As you wish, princess,” the unicorn leaves.

“Do you need anything else, Luna?” asks Sharp.

“Send Shady Glen in,” she replies, “I don’t doubt for a second he’s eager to see what’s been happening in here tonight. Midnight Cloak will stay alone on door duty. The official story is that in light of the invasion, I decided to have a guard close for tonight.”

Sharp knows Luna and the elite members of the Nightguard too well to ask if she’s sure about that. He leaves and instructs one of the two door guards to go inside and not breathe a word to anyone about anything he’s going to see.

As the door closes behind Shady Glen, the batpony's eyes stop on the chitinous form sitting on the bed.

"What is that, Your Highness?"

"That's what We want to figure out, Shady," Luna takes a deep breath and her horn lights up with an eerie teal glow, "Keep an eye on both of us."

She lies down, the glow envelops 65536 who lets out a squeaky yawn, and before it can turn its head around to look for Not-Blue, the heaviness of its body makes it curl up by Luna's hind legs and fall asleep within seconds.

When 65536 opens its eyes, it is standing in a room that could rival the breeding caverns in size, though it's far more rectangular than the common jagged domes back in the hive. Parts of the ceiling are missing, showing grey clouds up in the sky. A balcony overlooking the throne ahead is inaccessible due to both staircases on the sides of the room having collapsed who knows when.

It's so beautifully quiet, almost like in the good old days of digging a fresh tunnel on its own. After resting in the peaceful silence for a few moments, 65536 decides to have a look around, starting with the massive wooden gate behind it.

It gives way under the drone's push, the wing breaks off of its rusty hinges, and with glacial slowness it falls over and slides down a short set of stairs on the other side leading into an empty black void.

"Huuuh," is all 65536 has to say. The world is a complicated place for a little drone, so spending too much time on details isn't really worth it, "Not-Blue?" it calls out.

There's no answer other than a strange whisper of wind from behind. Where there was nothing before, there now stands a tall, faintly familiar equine shape seemingly filled with what to 65536 looks like the night sky.

“What brings you here, little creature?” it asks in a booming voice.

“Dunno,” 65536 shrugs, “I just suddenly felt sleepy and now I’m here.”

That seems to give the being a pause.

“You do not seem worried.”

“Nope.”

“Are you not afraid of this form?” it opens its eyes wide, revealing pure white glow. Its mouth follows, glowing like the midday sun and filled with sharp teeth.

65536 leans forward, tilts its head, and replies:

“Nah, it’s just like looking at the sky at night. Sky isn’t scary.”

“And the teeth?” it’s suddenly right in front of the drone without even moving. It opens its jaws wide and snaps them at it.

“I got those too, see?” 65536 opens its mouth and pokes the two fangs in there.

For some reason, the star creature growls, its features shift, and two giant spider legs sprout from the sides of its barrel. Venom starts dripping from its mouth as it hisses at 65536 who gives it a confused look.

“Are you a changeling too?” it scratches its head, concentrates, and *three* more spider legs grow out of each side of its barrel, “Look, now I got more than you!” it wobbles its new legs in the air.

Star pony’s eyes narrow.

“What are you afraid of, *changeling*?”

65536 takes a loooooooooong breath.

“Big rocks, cave-ins, cave spiders, Badlands scorpions, glowing goo, glowing grass, other unexplained glowing stuff-”

“Okay, natural phenomena and glowing-” Star pony tries to talk over 65536 with no success.

“-explosive rocks, random red barrels, underground rivers, those are the worst. You just dig dig dig, and then you go blub blub and you’re gone. Anyway, where was I?”

“Alright, alright, I get it-”

“Pockets of gas, acid drips, starvation, those weird fish with more teeth than both of us put together and the worst part about them is the shiny ball on their forehead-”

“Stop!”

Zero result.

“-the crusher, that’s the worst.”

“I WILL DEVOUR YOUR SOUL!”

“Uhh, is that the part on the bottom of my hooves? I’m sorry, without the high ranks around I can’t recall that many things. Wait, are you grumpy just because you’re hungry? What do you star ponies eat anyway? We changelings eat love.”

The star pony’s eye twitches.

“I devour fear, terror, and sanity of lesser creatures!”

“Fear?” 65536 smacks the side of its head, “I completely forgot, I was just starting off with the list-” it takes another long breath.

“No, don’t you dare!”

“Those evil mole thingies, lava - yeah, that’s a really bad one, sudden crevasses, bedrock, crusher again. I know I said it before but it really is *the worst*-”

“For the love of all nightmares STOP!”

“-aaand the high ranks. They’re the super worst, even worse than the crusher. Eeeeh, or maybe not. The crusher is supposed to hurt more but the high ranks can just come and slurp you and you’re gone,” 65536 wipes its forehead, “Awww, sorry, did I scare you with all that? There’s so much more but once Not-Blue arrives we’ll be safe. She’s big and soft and white and warm and full of love.”

The drone beaming without a care in the world is just too much.

The star pony’s form bubbles and shifts into that of the changeling queen, majestic, towering, powerful, and merciless. The one form it learned that the changeling fears the most.

That lasts for about a second before the body starts dripping acid, sprouting extra legs, a stinger, several rocks, multiple horns, mouths all over its body filled with needle-like teeth, and a bioluminescent light of an anglerfish.

65536 gives it one incredibly confused stare before a crevasse opens only underneath the monstrosity and it falls into a flowing stream of magma in the depths.

“Huuuuh,” the drone scratches its head as everything suddenly stops and disappears, the big room going completely silent again, “What was that all about?”

A ray of moonlight pierces the clouds and lights the shattered throne at the other end of the room, and from its silvery light steps out the shimmering form of Luna.

“Are you okay?” she asks, “I couldn’t get in immediately. The tantabus didn’t hurt you?”

“Tanta-what?” 65536 tilts its head, “Was that the purple star thingy? I think it got a little confused and threw itself into lava.”

“Whaaaaaaat?!” Luna physically leans back as reality stops making sense.

65536 shrugs.

“I dunno. What is this place anyway? I kinda like it, it’s a bit like home but, you know, without the constant buzzing of the hive mind.”

Luna has to shift gears.

“This is... this is my mental fortress, my pocket dimension modelled on an old castle in the Everfree forest I used to reside in before... before... nevermind. I was afraid that if the tantabus was able to lock even *me* out, it must be powerful enough to torture the life out of you.”

“Nope, we just had a chat and then it sorta ate itself.”

Luna’s eye twitches as migraine assaults her. *Nothing* is making sense at the moment. How was a small changeling able to hurt a dreamweaver in the real world? How was it able to force the tantabus to retreat?

She takes a deep breath. There’s a more important thing to sort out right now, and if she can do that, she’ll get to the answers eventually.

“How come you can understand me and talk?”

“I, umm, hatched like that?”

“I mean, how come you can’t speak in the real world?”

65536 blinks.

“Huuuuuuh...” it ponders the situation for a moment, “I... think it’s because we don’t speak ponish back home and there are no high ranks around for me to tap into,” it rubs its temples, “I can’t recall... much. Hey, how come you *understand* me here then? How is it that *can* I talk to you now?”

“Simple,” Luna’s finally starting to get a grip on the situation, “There’s no real language in dreams, only feelings and intentions. In the dreamscape, we all are of one reality. We can understand things far out of our experience and knowledge if there’s somepony else who knows them involved.”

“Hey, that’s like the hive mind! The high ranks knew these long words,” 65536 spreads its forelegs to illustrate, “Uhhh... I can’t exactly recall which but they were really difficult.”

“Like marmalade?” asks Luna, the corner of her mouth curling upwards.

“Ohhhh, that’s a *big* one!” the changeling’s eyes go wide, “The high ranks must know that and many many more too. The queen has to know *all* the words, I think.”

“Speak of words, little changeling, what’s your name?”

“I’m drone 65536,” with a hint of pride in its voice, it adds, “You’re Luna!”

“That’s a number.”

“Really? What comes after Luna?” the drone’s mouth makes an ‘o’ of surprise.

“No, I mean, Luna is a name but you, 65536, that’s a number.”

“Yup.”

Luna closes her eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath. Two completely different worlds.

“*Why* do you have a number instead of a name?”

“It’s a rank. It means that the stronger you are, the lower your number gets. I mean, for us drones it kinda just means who managed to get the most scraps of love but for warriors and infiltrators it’s a big thing. 9999 once said that the top ranks always keep competing against each other on missions and stuff.”

“So... your rank 1 is the most powerful changeling there is?”

“Other than the queen, yeah.”

“Hmmm, and what can you tell me about your hive?”

“Not much? I can’t even recall the map anymore. There’s a *loooooo*t of tunnels, bad changelings get eaten or thrown into the crusher, and everyone obeys that higher rank tells them.”

“That’s all?”

65536 shrugs.

“I’m a drone. I dig stuff and carry stuff. I’m not supposed to know stuff,” it pauses, furrowing its nonexistent brows, “Aaand... I had... a rusty horseshoe and two nails tucked away behind a loose rock in the shaft x0554ww35d72s!”

“I couldn’t understand the last thing you said, it just sounded like buzzing and chittering to me.”

“That’s just how we mark places in here,” 65536 taps his head, “Anyway, now I’ve got you, Shabiski, and Not-Blue, and that’s like... at least five times better than a rusty horseshoe and two nails,” it beams.

“Shabiski?” Luna decides to take the ‘*at least*’ part as technically true rather than mathematically insulting, “You mean Sharp Biscuit?”

“Ooooooh! That makes so much more sense!” the drone nods, “My rusty nails were sharp too. Does he taste like biscuits or is he crunchy like our chitin or soft, sweet, and warm like Not-Blue?” its eyes go wide with eager curiosity.

It takes all Luna’s self-control not to start grinning like an idiot. Instead, she forces herself to focus on the task at hoof.

“Yes on some of those, I’ll let you figure out which on your own. Do you think that if you got close to a changeling who speaks ponish, you could

talk in the real world too?”

“Uhh, I think so.”

“Then I’ve got a job for you.”

“Digging?” 65536’s eyes light up, “I can do digging! Can I take Not-Blue with me?”

Luna smiles.

Asking about being able to harm dreamscape creatures would have to wait. There’s no doubt the small changeling has absolutely zero idea about anything that’s happening.

However, it might just be the key to figuring out how to communicate with any potential survivors.

Author's Notes:

A long one for today with a little bit of lore, but maybe it might help the tiniest bit to make this Monday better.

156, 387: 5

Darkness has fallen on the forest and the changeling group is sitting in a clearing, all pretty much invisible to common observers aside from the teal bioluminescent glow of their eyes.

“It’s time for a story about one of the old queens...” 387 waves his forelegs in a spooky fashion, making the drones huddle together. A piece of bark drops from the open jaw of 36658, “Yeah, you’d better be scared. Most of them were absolutely nuts.”

“Marking as a traitor in 3... 2... 1...” 156 smirks, pretend-writing into an invisible journal.

“You know where you can shove that invisible pen and set it to vibrate, don’t you?” 387 snorts, “Anyway, this one’s about Shroud, the second changeling queen, and the horror of burrowing worms.”

He glances at 156 who is watching him intensely, not commenting on what to her has to be a made-up story.

“Go on,” she nods.

387 clears his throat.

“So, Shroud was a shrewd, heh, queen in the times when changelings were hiding away from the rest of the world. Back then, ponies were aware of changeling existence and far from friendly, so she led the hive away from major pony settlements, instead taking out small towns and villages, straight up cocooning entire populations and having her drones carry them.”

So far, that’s par for course in the eyes of the listening drones.

“Eventually, though, the settlements grew more and more sporadic and with the hive numbering hundreds of thousands the cocooned ponies couldn’t

last long. Her scorched ground strategy also made sure that she had nowhere to return, so the only way was forward.”

“Umm, did she start eating other changelings?” asks 57999, raising its hoof.

387 grins, leans closer, and says in a conspiratory hushed voice:

“That’s the thing, she didn’t!”

“Wooo!” cheers 54331.

“Go queen!” adds 10013.

387 suddenly points at 36658 who immediately hides its chunk of bark behind its back.

“Mhmmpf?!” it also completely forgets that it’s been chewing on more in its mouth.

“Why? Because she could extract love from inanimate objects. Not much, granted, but in her situation, every little bit counted.”

“Like... from bark?” asks 36658, eyes widening, proving once again that quick thinking isn’t a drone’s main purpose.

“No, I was pointing at you just because I wanted to stretch my leg,” 387 rolls his eyes.

“Awww...”

“Yes, even from bark,” 387 sighs, realizing that sarcasm doesn’t get across well when targeted at someone made for taking things literally.

“BEST. QUEEN. EV-” 36658 bites down when 156 shoots him a scowl, “...secondbestqueenever...” it corrects itself quickly.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be so quick with the praise if I were you,” 387 nods, “She was an infiltrator queen and her speciality was venoms, namely acid that could dissolve pretty much anything and absorb love from it, even

something as minor as flowers. Something with bees loving it or whatever, I don't know the details. In short, if there was any love to be had inside any physical matter, she could melt it and absorb it. Got it?"

Group nodding ensues. From the corner of his eye, 387 notices that even the other warriors on watch and 918 have inched a little closer to him.

"So, eventually when the hive got so far from civilization that even the ponies in cocoons began withering beyond the point of usefulness, she started with the usual love-saving methods - hibernation of anyone not crucial, eating the lowest ranks, and so on. You know the drill better than anyone," he points at the huddled drones who nod again and shudder.

"As they marched, the hive's numbers started dropping rapidly to keep the high ranks strong and ready for anything. However, *that* was what eventually turned against her."

"Her top ranks tried to dethrone her, I take it?" asks 156.

"Nope!" 387 beams, "Unexpected, is it? No, Shroud was actually a respected queen and, as I said, the top ranks were decently fed all the time. What *did* happen, however, was that they entered a jungle somewhere supposedly in the south of Equestria, and her changelings started getting sick with something she couldn't identify. Their chitin started flaking off and turned brittle but on examination her infiltrators couldn't find anything. Granted, changelings and medicine have never gone well together and, obviously, drones were the first to get infected so there wasn't *that* much effort put into figuring out what was going on."

"Booo!" comes from the clumped-up drones.

"And then..." 387 pauses for dramatic effect, "The infected changelings started disappearing along with the guards posted at the camping hive's perimeter. Drones, low-ranked warriors, and infiltrators alike."

"Deserters?" asks 918, the only infiltrator left other than 156.

“That’s the thing - no,” 387 shakes his head, “If they just left, higher ranks would simply track them through their hive links but that wasn’t the case. Their links simply *vanished* along with the changelings.”

“Did they have no one with any tracking skills?” asks 156 skeptically.

“It might surprise you, but jungles weren’t the usual changeling haunts. Too warm and too humid at the same time, plus lacking widespread civilization. Still, it was possible to eventually adapt to their surroundings and start exploring the jungle in detail but not before losing almost half of the hive. Absolutely *massive* losses within days.”

“Whoaaah!” drones do their droning.

“Yep. That expedition, more than anything else, was responsible for us changelings almost being wiped out. Anyway, at some point, Shroud lost her patience and finally tasked her top ranks to patrol the spread out changelings, keeping only 1 and 2 as her bodyguards. Before, she wasn’t too keen on leaving herself open to any potential deserters turning against her but the mounting losses were too much. So, as the hive rested, the top ranks patrolled as quickly as they could, burning love to keep their senses enhanced and to be able to keep an eye on everyone, and finally they scored a success. An infected warrior simply picked itself up in front of their eyes, its hive link went completely black, and it disappeared in the thick undergrowth. The top ranks went after it and...” he pauses.

No one says anything. The drones are leaning forward, hanging on his every word, and he smirks to himself, picking something off of the ground and starting to fiddle with it with his hooves.

“And nothing,” he continues, “It got out of sight and its tracks were gone, leaving behind only a slightly messed up patch of ground. After reporting their findings to Shroud, the queen ordered her drones to dig, suspicious that some indigenous life form was possibly dragging her changelings underground. It didn’t explain the hive link shutdowns but it was a start.”

He takes a long breath, completely ignorant of 156 *glaring* at him while thoughtfully rubbing her chin.

“So the drones dug and dug, and suddenly the ground swelled up and burst open, revealing millions of hoof-long worms everywhere! The drones who were in the center of the hole were swallowed immediately by the swarms and piles of worms burrowing deep into their carapace with ease, and even entering through nose and ears, chewing deep into their brains and devouring them. A single clump of worms could take over a changeling’s hollowed-out head and lead it into the central mass where the worms almost immediately turned its entire body to dust,” he raises his hoof and blows a small cloud of dust at the huddling drones.

“Eeeep!” they flinch and lean backwards as one.

“H-How did queen Shroud get out of there?” asks 918, uncertainty in her voice.

“She ordered everyone to fly upwards. It quickly turned out that the burrower worms couldn’t really control their victims with any precision so flying was out of their league. A mental call rang out to force transformations and whoever had the love started burning with green fires, the corona lighting the sky for miles on end, and burning away the worms who haven’t managed to chew their way into changelings yet. More and more fell but whoever was left, it was certain that they were okay.”

“So she took the hive and flew away?” asks 156.

“Oh holes no!” 387 chuckles, “You don’t just attack a changeling queen and get away with it, even if you are a mindless, instinct-driven animal. Shroud’s special power, as I said, was melting things. She could synthesize acids beyond the level of anyone else, and she asked her hive who wanted revenge. Whoever answered got eaten, fueling her power and giving her the ability to start puking acid everywhere, vaporizing the worms and their habitat and leaving only green mist filled with scraps of love and memories of the lost changelings. She turned the entire jungle into a swamp of acidic sludge on her own while the rest of the hive cheered.”

“Yaaaay!” drones wave their forelegs in the air, “Go Shroud! Go Shroud! Wooo!” even without knowing what a Mexicolt wave is, they synchronize perfectly for it, “Kick those worms’ butts!”

387 clears his throats.

“However, that happened a loooong time ago, and I heard that over all those centuries, some more nests of those worms were discovered more to the north, and they got a little more intelligent. Not much, I grant you, but enough to develop a concept of ‘enemy’, and there’s only one enemy they seek to destroy - changelings. Eternally hungry, wriggling... underground... mass!” with his final word, he lobs something at the audience.

Squeezed and noodled-up clumps of grass land on the drones who start screaming in horror.

“AAAAAH! WORMS EVERYWHERE!”

“GETITOFFGETITOFFGETITOFF!”

“I CAN FEEL IT EATING THROUGH MY CHITIN!”

“I SWALLOWED IT! AAAAAAAAH!”

“IT’S IN MY BRAAAAAAINNN!”

156 facehoofs, muttering:

“Then I admire its accuracy...” she stands up and raises her voice, “Alright, everyone calm down!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“EEEEEEEEEEK!”

“IT’S IN MY MANE! IT’S IN MY MANE!”

“YOU DON’T HAVE A MANE!”

“AAAAAAH! IT’S ALREADY EATEN MY MANE!”

“I CAN FEEL IT IN MY BRAAAIN!”

“YOU DON’T HAVE A BRAIN!”

“HEY, THAT WAS MEAN!”

“SORRY!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Okay, time for plan B,” 156 rolls her eyes, “Warriors, go round the idiots up. Not you, 387!” she adds to the rising second-in-command, “I’ve got a question for you.”

“Yees?” he raises an eyebrow. She leans so close to him that he can feel her breath on his muzzle, and whispers:

“*How* do you know about that? A mid-rank warrior like you should have had no access to the hive mind archives.”

387 looks around and points.

“Look, isn’t that 31214 running away into the forest? I gotta go!” he bolts, “You stay here in charge!”

“Get over here you damn- grrrrr!” 156 stops the ground as the warrior gets immediately lost between the trees, “THIS ISN’T OVER!”

387 follows the panicked screaming and quickly catches up to 31214, tackling the drone to the ground.

“AAA-”

Slap!

“a- ouch...” 31214 pouts, “What was that for?”

“Give yourself a second to think, then try saying a different thing. If it’s a wrong thing again, I’ll punch you this time,” 387 glares at it.

“Ummm... sorry?” 31214 takes the safe option, “I, uhh, panicked. Good story, though!”

“Much better,” 387 stands up from the drone’s barrel and helps it back on all fours, “Now let’s go b... ack,” his eyes go wide and his jaw drops as he stares behind the drone.

“Hey, I’m not falling for your tricks this time,” 31214 frowns. When 387 doesn’t react, the drone slowly turns around, spurred by a strange orange glow which it would swear wasn’t there before.

A pitch black rift is hanging in the air, now visible even without the glow of changeling eyes. In front of it stands a tall mare wearing gold-foiled full plate armor with a halberd locked to it by a hook on its side. She’s pure white, her eyes are amethyst-violet, but her mane and tail look like fire come to life, explaining the orange glow illuminating the area.

“You failed him,” she says in a deep, cold tone.

“I... I... I...” 387 is staring right at her, unable to move.

“He died because of you.”

“There were... there were too many of them... we couldn’t...”

“You were supposed to keep them in line.”

“We tried to, but his own daughter-”

The halberd floats up into the air and flames envelop its blade.

“You will join him as you should, as all the others did.”

387’s entire body sags, he breathes out, and lowers his head.

“I... I deserve it...”

The huge pony seems to completely ignore 31214 who momentarily ponders fleeing back to camp and returning with help but something about

the situation is making it clear that 387 wouldn't even try to buy himself time.

And so, the drone trots over and kicks the pony's foreleg as hard as it can.

"Ow! Owowowowow!" the drone hops backwards. It was like kicking a statue made of diamonds.

The huge mare flicks the butt of her floating halberd, knocking 31214 off of its hooves, taking steps towards 387 like an executioner to a prisoner resigned to his fate.

Something clicks in 31214's totally worm-less brain, and the drone gives attacking the creature a second shot. This time, however, its foreleg flashes green, and the weird pony stumbles backwards as it notices that half of its hind leg is missing with her next step.

"You little!" the halberd comes down with a flash of fire.

"EEEE...P?" 31214 refuses to move so that it doesn't inadvertently lose any important bits. When nothing bad seems to happen, it carefully opens one eye and looks upwards.

387 is standing above it, his forelegs crossed as he blocked the handle just below the blade.

"Run!" he hisses at 31214 as he lets go, kicks the drone to the side, spins around on the other hind leg, and roundhouse kicks the big pony with full swing and power.

He lands on the ground, clutching his fractured hind leg. The force of the blow made the armored pony stumble, mostly due to its lack of stability thanks to its missing hind leg, but he clearly hit something hard and completely indestructible.

So how did the drone...?

"EEEEEEEEEP!" the high-pitched drone battlecry filled with 90% fear of the creature and 10% fear of what 156 would do to it if it came back without

387 rings through the air.

31214 jumps straight at the pony, its glowing forelegs swinging wildly and taking out chunks of the pony's flesh as easily as if it was punching water. 387 limps back on all fours to help but that one simple attack left half of the pony missing, gore splattered everywhere.

When 31214 stops screaming and flailing, it realizes that its carapace is clean, and there's nothing around other than 387 with his foreleg on its shoulder. The chitin of the warrior's hind leg is still cracked, though, leaving no doubt that *something* really did just happen. The drone looks around, opens and closes its mouth silently, and then looks around again.

"Whuh?"

"Let's head back to camp," says 387, patting the drone's head.

"Wh-What happened? There was blood everywhere, then nothing. The fire pony, big axe-"

387 narrows his eyes.

"Let's head back to camp," he repeats.

"Okay," the drone doesn't push further. It's not its job. The high ranks are here to think, it is here to dig and carry stuff.

With that cleared up in its head, 31214 follows the slowly limping warrior back to the camp.

When they get to the clearing, 156 walks up to him, fuming:

"What do you think y-" she notices 387's leg, "What happened?"

"*Something* that looked like a pony attacked us," he says after a second of hesitation not lost on 156.

"Elaborate."

“It wasn’t a pony. Don’t ask me how I know that because I don’t have an answer. I kicked it and almost broke my leg. 31214 shredded it to pieces, though.”

“What?” 156 leans back, “That makes no sense. Let me have a look inside your head-”

“No!” 387 barks at her, almost feral. He takes a long breath and adds, much calmer, “Don’t bother wasting love. I’ll do it myself,” he puts his short horn to hers and replays the visual part of the last few minutes.

“Did she look like that alicorn about whom queen Chrysalis was so worried?”

“Celestia, yes,” 387 nods, “But it wasn’t her,” he looks at the drones, “You guys, which one of you fixed 47989’s head?”

“I’ll fill-in the fracture myself, don’t worry,” says 156, sits down by 387’s hind legs, and starts liberally applying love-infused goo on his damaged carapace.

None of the changelings catch a sight of a mantis-like foreleg retracting into a small rift hanging above them and disappearing along with it.

“Thanks,” 387 lies down on his side and closes his eyes.

Damn you, Chrysalis...

Why don’t you queens ever learn?

Author's Notes:

Lore, plot, tiny bit of mystery, and a sliver of potential amusement.

CH: 1/13 - Chrysalis

Author's Notes:

Someone wanted Bugbutt. I don't have any cute huggery to do with her so have a lore dump!

Duuuuuuuuump!

PS: Cuteness will return eventually once we figure out how to transfuse 65536's blood into other changelings.

For the first time in centuries, the darkness of the hive mind feels like a fresh breeze. The silence, however, is deafening. There's no hive, no remnants of all the pent-up fury of the old queens beating down on her, nothing.

She just sits there, basking in the relaxing peace, and soon she senses the two blocked hive links of the only guards she took with her after her abysmal failure in Riverside which was the final straw that opened her eyes.

The same eyes which open in the darkness ahead, followed by the materialization of a mirror image of herself.

"Look at yourself," Chrysalis sneers, "Alone, hated by the world, and outsmarted by your rank 16. Blind and crippled rank 16, by the way."

"That's one way to look at it," real Chrysalis allows herself a soft smile.

"Oh, do I feel excuses coming?"

"Excuses? Far from it," Chrysalis shakes her head, "Just a lesson learned. I have enough mental discipline to avoid the pitfalls of self-pity, most of the time at least."

Doppelganger Chrysalis rolls her eyes.

“So, what lesson did you learn from your hive being wiped out in Canterlot for the second time? That alicorns are overpowered as hole?”

“Oh, pleeeeeease,” Chrysalis chuckles, “I imprisoned the alicorn of Love, drained her, and with the *fake* love of *one* stallion I brought Celestia to her knees. What I *did* learn from that was how quickly can stolen and soured love betray you. The thing is, dear fake myself, that while I might not be the most morally pure changeling leader, I am the smartest one.”

“You’re definitely not missing the usual dirigible-sized ego of all the other queens. And yet, let me recapitulate, you’re alone and your hive is shattered into fragments or dead.”

“Tsk tsk tsk,” Chrysalis shakes her head, “Now I understand what you are. The insane revenants of hive queens plaguing the hive mind aren’t completely gone, are they? And you are a shadow, the most stable memory of myself,” she closes her eyes and takes a long breath, “Just like the shades of all the other queens I’m going to have to deal with then, I assume. Thankfully, you have no power like this, none of you can mess with my head or *my* hive anymore.”

“Heh,” shade Chrysalis bares her fangs, “So that’s why you left them...”

“Yep. Granted, playing chess against myself and several other grandmasters at the same time wasn’t easy, but here we are. It took me some time to understand the sudden emptiness inside my head now that the living queen fragments are gone and when I sensed you I thought they just retreated for a while, but that wasn’t it. I’ve lived with all of those revenants inside the hive mind for so long that even the memories inside my own head took on a life of their own. Now there’s nowhere left for you to retreat, I made sure that my two warriors are immune to any hive mind... leakage. I’ve got a question, though.”

“Do you? Is there something the great and powerful Chrysalis doesn’t know?”

“Where, why, and how did the revenants of old queens escape from the hive mind? I felt their rage and hatred even as I was standing in the Canterlot castle throne room and watching the city being taken over.”

“In what reality do you think any of us will tell you, failure?”

Shade Chrysalis’ neck chitin bends inwards and cracks, surrounded by green glow of real Chrysalis’ horn.

“Because you are a powerless shadow inside my mind, inside the mind of the best infiltrator queen who’s ever lived. I can torture you here *forever* in ways you can’t- well, I mean you, in particular, *can* imagine but the older queens can’t. In fact, you knowing how I can make you feel even without a real body should actually be even more terrifying.”

“And what good would that do in the end?”

“It would make *me* feel better.”

“Alright, and how would that make you different from the other queens then?”

“I suppose that since you’re my fragment from before Canterlot failure number two, you wouldn’t get it,” Chrysalis shakes her head, “All these centuries, they blamed Celestia and ponies. For everything bad that’s happened to us, really. And yes, ponies started it and Celestia deserves... a kick in her cake-fueled fat plot, but for being ancient queens, they were really like larvae saying ‘Look what you made me do, it is all *your* fault’, as if they had on self-control, no agency.”

“There was never a chance for peace! Everyone only saw us as monsters, as weapons!”

“Yeeeeeah... that’s what the old queens wanted us to remember. However, someone with my level of mental magic could see the discrepancies, especially when my infiltrators started deserting and taking others with them. Specifically, anyone of low enough rank not to be privy to the influence of the old queen’s rage. It made me wonder why, why would

changelings choose suicide rather than life in the hive or hibernation. That was when I started scouring the hive mind for any scrap of our history which wasn't tainted by their insanity, and when I discovered... him. You should know this, actually."

"I... argh..." shade Chrysalis bites her lip and clutches her head. After a short moment, she recovers, "Not following you here."

"Huh, so their influence blinds other revenants whose hatred in turn maintains the feedback loop. Ponies bad, changelings monsters, nom nom love. So if I died and stored myself, I would be the same. I can't even be mad..." Chrysalis shakes her head, "I was talking about the king of the changelings. The first, the traitor, the eternal prisoner. His version of our history was a little... different than how the others presented it, or possibly even remembered it after so much time."

"So he was lying to you, whoop-de-doo."

"I was suspicious, yes, so I started sending out more and more infiltrators under the pretense of gathering love for a future big invasion. However, that wasn't the goal of all of them. Some were supposed to find the deserters and-

"If the next words aren't to execute them on the spot, I'm going to facehoof."

"-to talk to them."

Shade Chrysalis facehoofs. Real Chrysalis smirks and continues:

"Yes, some changelings whom they discovered had replaced a pony - lover, foal, friend. Yet, there was a rather small amount of those cases, and in some instances they replaced a pony who died away from their family. In most cases, though, they simply took on a form of a random pony and started a life."

"Too bad you couldn't see how many tried that and starved to death."

“Fewer than you think. You see, without the taint of the old queens, the low-ranked changelings couldn’t understand why we were supposed to hate ponies. In that, they realized a lesson that the old queens forcibly blinded us to - to earn love by caring.”

“WE TRIED! THEY HATED US! TORCHES AND PITCHFORKS, REMEMBER?”

“We didn’t take it slow, we didn’t do it right. We *will* do it right this time, but first I must make sure there’s no taint of the old queens left inside my own head. Next, I must find where the real hive mind revenants escaped to, which neatly brings us back to my original question - where, why, and how?”

Shade Chrysalis closes her eyes.

“Do you really, from the bottom of your heart, believe that you’re not just restarting a cycle which will lead to millions more changelings dying again?”

“There will be pain, there will be idiots, there will be losses, and they might number in millions. That’s inevitable,” Chrysalis narrows her eyes, “But there will be a direction other than ‘hide and bide your time until you can eradicate or enslave *literally every other sentient species on the planet*’. We won’t have a repeat of ‘The Great Changeling Empire’ attempt. Speaking of which, if I’m to have a chat with every queen fragment, does that mean my mother is next? Because we’ll have words about that entire Empire thing. Some will be curse words not safe for larvae.”

Shade Chrysalis looks at real Chrysalis again.

“I don’t know where the hive mind fragments escaped to. They had to be jumping away from Canterlot faster than the love explosion, and the transfer of knowledge and information would be killing every changeling they used as a crutch. There was no plan beforehoof, they must have improvised. I have no idea in whose head they can be now, but it has to be a changeling. As for ‘how’, you know the method of transferring consciousness and its dangers. And finally - the ‘why’ is simple. They

assumed the love explosion would literally boil or rip apart every changeling from the inside, it wasn't anything against us in particular, it was just a survival instinct."

"Yes, a survival instinct..." Chrysalis growls, "The instinct that caused all the old queens to clutter and poison the hive mind under the pretense of keeping lessons and memories when, in reality, they just couldn't admit the simplest of things - they were afraid to die. Keeping their consciousness alive was the single biggest drain on the hive's love reserves. Without the need for that, we wouldn't be rationing every single drop, reprocessing every changeling once they served their purpose, or forcing the more developed ones into near-constant hibernation. The hive would be much more than a queen and her... appendages."

Shade Chrysalis frowns, crossing her forelegs on her chest.

"A long, hard look into the mirror would do you good now."

"I am well aware of my role in building and furthering that state of affairs," real Chrysalis hisses at her, "But without the constant beating of the old hags against my mental defenses I think I'm finally ready to do what must be done. First, I will lay my own memories of the queens to rest. Second, I will gather any survivors I can who are still willing to follow me. Third, I will find into whose mind the real hive revenants escaped to. And fourth, I will contact Celestia and present our case. I won't *hope* for forgiveness but I will *work* my beautiful and bouncy bug ass off for redemption."

"That's a tall order, which will either save us or end us."

"Yes, but don't forget that while I might not be the most morally pure changeling leader-"

"-I'm still the best queen there ever was," shade Chrysalis finishes with a smile and disappears, leaving behind only a fleeting moment of peace for the queen.

In the real world, Chrysalis opens her eyes, yawns, and stands up as her two guards glance her way. With a surprised blink, she realizes how drained,

both physically and mentally, the conversation left her.

“One thirteenth of the way there,” she says and the changeling warriors give her puzzled looks, “I’m going to need more love for this. 96, head off and look for a settlement. I’ll do the infiltrating myself.”

True love and affection will have to wait. After all, while a delicious, filling, and healthy three-course meal is the goal, a hayburger will do in a pinch.

1313: 1

Author's Notes:

Aaand that's the final challenger!

I really just wanted to write some drones in cute or funny situations, I swear, but then I made the usual mistake of thinking of plot and filling up empty periods of time in the bigger world.

So, we have 165,387 / 1988,9999 / Chrysalis / 65536 / 1313 and that's going to be everyone for this one.

The beating on the door of prince Blueblood's estate comes to a sudden end after a loud crash which announces the end of all the buzzing and screaming from all over Canterlot.

Everything goes pink for a brief moment.

Prince Blueblood, sitting on his bed in his dark room with windows and shutters closed and aggressively holding a pillow, lets out a sigh of relief.

His ears twitch as he starts hearing something akin to a drawn out whistle which gets louder and louder until-

CRASH!

The reinforced anti-assassin, anti-magic, anti-commoner rabble scum, metallic shutters shatter with a massive impact sending their shrapnel everywhere and avoiding decapitating the already trembling prince only by sheer accident and the destiny's malevolent desire to keep him alive.

Hearing the crash followed by the prince's high-pitched girlish screeching, the zebra mare stationed outside his door -mostly so that no one would see the prince shake like a leaf and sob into his pillow while begging for his

“auntie” to stop the invasion- enjoys her “boss” incoherent panicked yelling for brief three seconds before barging inside.

“AA
AAAAH!”

Blueblood is pointing at a changeling lying amidst the wreckage of the super-shutters, glass window, and furniture.

“AAAAAAH! KILL IT WITH FIRE!”

“I am not a unicorn and we are not equipped with flamethrowers, your Highness. You sign our requisition bill every month, remember?” replies Zamira while approaching the black creature bent in shapes clearly inconsistent with life.

“KILL IT WITH ACID!”

“That’s more *their* thing, from what I’ve seen so far.”

“KILL IT WITH MAGIC!”

“Again, not a unicorn.”

“KILL IT WITH DEATH!”

“It’s not moving and I’m pretty sure that legs don’t normally bend that way. Same with necks.”

“MAKE IT DEADDER!”

She tosses a long stick towards the prince which makes him squeal and shuffle away while dragging a blanket up to his neck.

“Here, you can use my baton. if you want to play with a changeling corpse, you’re a big colt and you can do it on your own.”

Blueblood lets the blanket go and carefully approaches the broken changeling lying in front of his bed.

The body twitches.

Crack

“Wha-?”

Crackcrackcrack!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Blueblood lets out his trademark high-pitched girlish scream as the body’s foreleg snaps into shape, and lobs the baton right at the changeling’s head.

“...owwww...”

“IT’SNOTDEADIT’SNOTDEADIT’SNOTDEADMAKEITDEAD!” he pleads, tears welling in his eyes. Unlike the distressed prince, she has enough presence of mind to hear the very quiet:

“...owwwcrap...”

She raises an eyebrow, giving the changeling an examining look.

“How about we lock it up? Her Highness might want one of them for questioning once the situation settles down a little,” Zamira gives her combat horseshoes a testing kick against the floor, the equivalent of cocking a griffon shotgun.

“...thankyoustripedlady...”

“NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!
NO! NO! DEAD! MAKE! NOW!”

“...holes...”

“There might be a royal reward in it for you. Perhaps some *actual* respect instead of ponies just kissing your plot because of your aunt.”

His indignant huff and bulging eyes are always a treat.

“You- what- how dare- I’ll-”

“You’ll do nothing, your father is employing me. On the other hoof, I *might* give a sworn testimony that you broke this changeling with your bare hooves in a fit of rage because it attacked your staff. I will even find a maid of yours willing to confirm in front of your “auntie” that you saved her life and innocence,” she sits down and crosses her forelegs on her chest with a smug smirk. She knows her ‘boss’.

Blueblood’s eye twitches and he grinds his teeth, weighing her insulting rudeness in private against the potential embellishment of his image in public.

“J-Just make sure that damn *thing* stays put. Break its legs if you have to.”

“...more pieces...?” groans 1313 quietly.

“Don’t worry, prince. I’m not exactly known for being *gentle*,” without much care, she slings 1313’s broken shell across her back, “Isn’t that right, *changeling*?”

Gurgle gurgle!

Frothing and broken 1313 has passed out in agony at her first touch.

“..OWWWWWW...”

“Rise and shine, bug monster!”

“...existence is suffering...”

“Yeeeah, you’re kinda all over the place. Not to mention all the blood. Is that green goo your blood?”

“...even my pain is in agony...”

“Weird, with your neck broken like that, I’d assume that your spine went through a blender and you wouldn’t feel *anything*.”

“...my fetlock hurts... and it’s lying over there...”

“I gathered all the pieces of you in a bucket, though the cleaning maids are going to have a field day with mops.”

“...my leg is missing...”

“Iiin the bucket.”

“...where’s the bucket...?”

“Turn your head.”

“...can’t. Neck broken...”

“How are you even *breathing*? Your barrel looks like a squeezed soda can.”

“...really wish I wasn’t...”

“No, seriously. Are you like some special immortal case or something? I went outside after dropping you off down here and the streets are *littered* with bug bits. Most of the corpses still look better than you, and even then I couldn’t make out which parts belonged to which body.”

“...just listening to that hurts...”

“You know, it’s a miracle you can still talk with a neck like... I know!”
Zamira smirks, “Like one of those bendy straws from MareDonald’s.”

Crunch!

“...much more owwww than before...”

“Did... did your foreleg just... break off?” Zamira’s smirk freezes, “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“...please not in the limb bucket...”

“Don’t act as if you’re going to use those parts again.”

“...just need... some duct-”

“Nooooooooo...!”

“...huh...?”

“Don’t you dare say duct tape. You can’t tell me that you just tape those bits on and you’ll be okay. If you do, I can get *extremely* punchy.”

“...oookay...”

“Good.”

“...got a stapler...?”

“Celestia damn it!” she kicks the floor of the wine cellar so hard sparks fly out, “I’ll go get some bandages so that you don’t bleed out from the *new* stump. If I spot *anything* out of place, I’ll immediately go into ‘no messing with me’ mode and finish you off. Blueblood’s reputation and my reward for catching a live one of you be damned.”

“...don’t worry...” croaks 1313, “...by the time you’re back... half of me will already be outside that little barred window by the ceiling... I just need one working... throwing leg...”

Crack!

“...crap... that’s... that’s a *bad* amount of blood...”

“Serves you right,” she rolls her eyes, “Two fresh stumps it is then.”

“...wait...!”

“I genuinely doubt that you have any more time to be screwing with me-”

“...something... someone... loves...” the light in 1313’s eyes starts fading, his already quiet speech becoming slurred, “...object... of... love... bring...”

“I hate everything about this,” Zamira is taking careful steps to avoid the pools of goo surrounding the changeling who by no measure should be alive locked in Blueblood’s private wine cellar.

Hanging from her belt is a bucket filled with clean water mixed with some medical-grade cleaning solution and, on the other side, is a dream catcher she brought with herself the first time she left Zebrica. Unlike the usual superstition that one needs to be big and hanging in the sleeping pony’s room, this one is more the size of a big necklace with two interlocked rings as its ornament. The ‘object of love’ description might have surprised most ponies but even city zebras practice some minor kind of shamanism and know from experience that items get naturally imbued with certain aspects of the surroundings they’re in for a long time.

Still, how it could affect a changeling who might or might not still be breathing is a mystery. In the absence of any other ideas, she simply puts the dream catcher on its chest, careful to avoid the glistening green smudges of what must be the changeling equivalent of blood.

She grabs the sponge and cleaning solution, and applies just the tiniest of pressure to scrub the nearest spot of the changeling’s carapace.

Crack.

“Oh for hips of the great spirit!” she curses quietly to herself, “I barely pushed against it.”

“...very... brittle...” whispers 1313.

“Huh, you *are* still alive,” she steps over the changeling’s body to his head unnaturally snapped and forced to look left.

“...I play dead... a lot...”

She looks around the cellar at the broken off limbs, some in a bucket, and pools of congealed goo.

“Convincingly.”

“Got any... tape?” his voice grows a little stronger. Is the dream catcher thing working?

“I thought you were kidding...”

“No... no... it’s cheap... and it works...”

Zamira resists the urge to facehoof and pulls out a spool of bandages.

“Would this work or do you literally need glue to avoid falling into pieces?”

“Oooh... bandages...” 1313 tries to whistle, which only comes out as a gurgle, “Someone’s living... the high... life.”

“Wh-” Zamira freezes.

The creature isn’t messing with her, is it?

There were *a lot* of orphaned foals in her part of Zebrica who had *nothing*, for whom a lightbulb in their room was a miracle.

Right now, she’s getting exactly the same feeling from the changeling in pieces in front of her.

Zami, don’t let it play you. Observe, learn. Info about the enemy might net you a neat sum of bits, if nothing else.

Taking a deep breath, she asks:

“Are you trying to tell me that I just tie the stumps back to your body and you’ll be okay?”

“Yes. The love... from that bendy thing... is helping a lot.”

“I usually... put myself back... together... once the mob with torches and... pitchforks tosses me... in a ditch... but this time... the explosion... made something wrong.”

Don't question it, Zamira. Clean that stump, carefully, and align it with the broken off foreleg.

The squelch as she presses the leg against the green wound is followed by the changeling grunting:

“...ohholeswhy...?!”

She pulls the leg off along with fresh strands of flesh.

“...andnowyourippeditoffagain...!” it twitches.

“Oh spirits, did those two pieces really start reconnecting already?”

“Yes! Just join up all the bits and get something to hold them together,” 1313 says in a strained voice, “Do I need to explain the concept of a duct tape to you?!”

“That's... I'm having trouble deciding whether it's amazing or utterly disgusting,” Zamira gives reconnecting the foreleg a second shot.

“Yeah, *you* are the one with the difficult part here-ohpleasedon'tripitoffagain!”

“No more mouthing off?”

“I'll be good.”

“Perfect,” Zamira smirks to herself, “Now... it's been a while since I last did a jigsaw puzzle but I *think* I swept up all the major pieces off the floor of Blueblood's suite.”

“You *thi-*”

“Hmmm?”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything. Specifically not anything that might make you crush, twist, or do anything else with that broken off fetlock you’re trying to glue back on me.”

“Hmmm, I could swear I heard-”

“Ididn’tsayanythingyoub-”

Zamira narrows her eyes and applies just a little too much pressure on his leg stump.

“-eautiful stripey lady,” 1313’s eye twitches.

“And don’t you forget it!”

65536: 7

Riding on Luna's back with Not-Blue's foreleg held firmly in its clamped mouth, 65536 is waving its see-through forelegs in front of its face. The only thing revealing its own body to itself is a shimmer making its carapace look like twisted glass.

It waves at shiny white ponies wearing gold-foiled steel armors standing at attention and saluting to Luna as she walks through the Canterlot castle. None of the ponies seem to notice 65536's gestures, although they almost always glance at Not-Blue on Luna's back.

More saluting. 65536 salutes back.

More armored ponies. 65536 salutes first. They salute back. Victory!

After descending down into castle levels where the hallways are dark, narrow, and no longer have windows, Luna eventually rounds a corner, and 65536 spots two earth ponies and one unicorn sitting on a bench next to a door made of wood reinforced with cast iron, two mares and one stallion. The older unicorn mare is wearing the same armor as the white or grey ponies upstairs and stands up and salutes when she sees Luna approach.

"Your Highness," is all she says.

The second mare is grey with black stripes all over her body, and she stands up and bows all the way to the floor.

The remaining earth pony stallion stands up and fidgets, visibly nervous. When the mare bows, he follows suit.

"At ease," says Luna, "Grey Shrine, We thought Sharp made it clear that civilians aren't allowed to this hearing."

"With all due respect, Your Highness, I think you might want to hear these two out before interrogating the changeling."

“Alright...?” Luna raises an eyebrow. Some members of the Royal Guard still haven’t gotten past Celestia being the only princess but this doesn’t *feel* like this kind of situation. Besides, Grey Shrine was the one responsible for the smooth transition of the Nightguard into the guard ranks after Luna’s return from the moon.

“Your Highness, these two are Zemi and Greyscale,” she glances first at the striped mare and then at the stallion, “They’ve known the changeling for some time and they both work at the brothel with her.”

“Plees, Fether is a good ponee... or shenjeling, prinsess,” pleads the stallion immediately, “Shee even worned us about d udders.”

“Udders?” Luna takes a moment to decipher the stallion’s strange, messed-up speech pattern.

“Your Majesty,” Zemi puts a hoof on the distressed stallion’s shoulder, “If you need any information about Tender Feather, we’re here to share our experience with her. Greyscale here lives with her and has known that she was a changeling for some time. We just wanted to be here to show support,” she looks at the floor for a moment, “She's not just a coworker, she’s a good friend.”

“Shee wudn’t bite anyponee-” the stallion tears up.

“Be quiet, Greyscale,” Grey Shrine interrupts him, “I have no doubt the princess will take your concern into consideration of your friend’s fate.”

The stallion opens his mouth again but Luna stops him with:

“I will. And I will question both of you once I’m done with... her, you said?”

“Yes, Tender Feather is a mare,” says Zemi.

“But shee can turn into enyponee,” adds the stallion, “Shee goes ‘whoosh!’ end den she ken be me! Shee once took mai shift when I wos seek. Shee

only wanted to hug and cuddle wit mee for it,” he freezes and looks at Zemi, “Soree.”

“Don’t worry about it,” replies the mare, “So, there you have it, Your Highness.”

“Yes...” Luna pauses, “I certainly have *something* here,” they feel genuine but could it be just the effect of being under changeling influence for so long? “I have yet to decide what that something is.”

“Umm, wot? Ai don’t understand...” Greyscale hangs his head.

“You don’t need to, at least at the moment,” replies Luna. When the stallion gives her a puzzled look, her horn flashes and the hooves through which 65536 is observing the ponies return to their usual black color.

“A shenjeeling wit a plushee!” Greyscale points immediately.

65536 points back. Finally, someone noticed it!

“Eets pointing at mee!”

“I’m just showing this to you so that you understand what position I’m approaching the situation from,” says Luna, ignoring 65536’s constant shifting on her back, “This one got blasted into my suite by the explosion and so far I’ve only been getting more and more questions with no answers. I’m hoping your changeling friend might be of some help.”

Her horn lights up and 65536 floats into the air, immediately starting to buzz and wave its legs with the plushie bigger than it still dangling from its mouth. When it lands, it immediately rushes towards Greyscale and points straight up at his face.

When the stallion touches its hoof with his own, 65536’s face lights up and it starts bouncing up and down without ever letting go of Not-Blue.

“Ai hev a plushee too,” he reaches into a stuffed saddlebag hanging from his side, pulls out a small Nightguard stuffed toy, and makes its snout boop the changeling, “See? His name ees Steeches.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” 65536 finally lets go of Not-Blue’s leg and gives the other plush a big hug.

This one is even more filled with love than Not-Blue!

Luna recognizes the high-pitched buzz-screach from the changeling’s previous discovery of bubbles and smiles.

“Keep an eye on those two for me, will you?” she nods to the changeling and the stuffed likeness of her sister, “I will call for you afterwards.”

“A harmless critter that has trouble communicating and is friends with a stuffed toy?” Grey Shrine smirks, “I have some experience in that regard.”

With no more concerns, Luna enters the interrogation room.

Two batponies and one unicorn whose barrel is covered with what looks like a bronze-colored changeling carapace are already present. The changeling is sitting in a chair, staring at Luna with eyes filled with fear. She notes to herself that without knowing that the changeling presented itself as female she would have no idea how to recognize it from her current angle.

None of the ponies present salute or greet Luna in any way, showing clearly that this meeting is far from formal.

“How far did you get?” asks Luna.

“The guys outside held us up so we’re just starting,” replies the Nightguard mare standing by the door.

“Alright then, proceed, Sharp.”

“What’s your name?” asks Sharp Biscuit, sitting across the table from the nervous changeling.

“Tender Feather, sir.”

“And your changeling name... or rank?” asks Luna.

“I can’t recall anymore, Your Highness,” she shakes her head, “Somewhere in the first hundred thousand.”

Luna nods to Sharp.

“Were you a part of the invasion?” he continues.

“Yes and no, sir.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve lived in Canterlot for three years, give or take. I didn’t want to join the army but...” Tender Feather trails off.

“But what?”

“I’m not sure a pony can understand it, sir. Changelings are connected in here,” she taps her head, “And the queen can send an order which is impossible to resist unless a changeling is powerful enough. I know- knew a few changelings who’ve lived here even longer than me, one of them helped me survive when I first arrived,” Feather sighs, “They died fighting the guards. They did their best to avoid causing harm but your guards just went all out, and I can’t even blame them.”

“How did you survive? You don’t seem particularly hurt.”

“Eeeh,” Feather scratches her head, “I’m not a warrior changeling, I just dance in a brothel and serve clients. I retained enough self-control to warn my friends and co-workers about what was coming while the changeling army was trying to break through the magic shield the Royal Guard set up, so when the queen’s order took over, Deep Dark punched me out and tied me up in the sex dungeon. Hey, don’t look at me like that! It’s a brothel, not a guardhouse. It’s not like we have the gear to lock a pony up other than for pretend reasons. Luckily for me, the explosion tossed me against our ‘tough love’ display. The wooden shelves hurt but the soft silicone toys provided enough padding.”

“Deep Dark, the Nightguard who reported you to us.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sharp looks sideways at the princess.

“Luna? A mission I don’t know about?”

“Just like I gave you the position of the Nightguard commander, I tasked Deep Dark and several others to get the feel of the night life of Canterlot and report to me. I couldn’t possibly go around learning everything on my own, especially with my *other* alicorn of the Night duties you saw yesterday with your own eyes.”

Sharp only nods.

“Alright, Tender Feather, what do you intend to do next? Presuming the princess allows you to stay in the city.”

“I...” the changeling pauses, “Can I ask a question first?”

“Sure.”

“What do you think I *can* do?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s simple - what do you think are my options? With all due respect, I’ve lived in this city longer than the princess here. I escaped from the hive with several others and not all of us got this far. I didn’t replace anypony. I... I *built* my life in Canterlot. If you don’t execute me or something, if you just kick me out then what do you think I can do?”

“Shapeshift into someone else and return, or try the same thing but in a different city where you’ll be forced to replace a pony, at least temporarily, because you won’t have any contacts to help you, am I right?” the strange unicorn with changeling carapace speaks up.

“Exactly,” Tender Feather nods with a hint of respect.

“Hmmm,” Luna taps her hoof against the table in thought, “We’ll have to keep you under lock and key for now-” she raises her foreleg as Feather opens her mouth, “Our *associate* here gave us the gist of how your feeding on emotions works,” she looks at the unicorn, “Positive feelings, right?”

“Love, affection, and lust, in that order,” the changeling nods, “By the way, *what is he?*”

“Blazing Light, just an ex-janitor unlucky enough to be a target of your queen’s attempt at infiltrating the castle through somepony nopony would notice and who could easily move around,” the unicorn chuckles darkly, “Whatever she did to me turned me from a unicorn into... this.”

“Wow, is that a thing?”

“I was kinda hoping one of you would know how to turn me back.”

Feather shakes her head.

“I doubt that anyone other than the top ranks or the queen herself would have a clue that it was even possible to transform a pony into a changeling, sorry.”

Blazing shrugs.

“That sucks, but other than the explosion setting me on fire, it’s not that bad.”

“Ahem,” Luna clears her throat, “What we *don’t* know is how long you can last without feeding. It is not the kind of experiment we would subject others to on a whim.”

“Oof,” Feather looks at the low ceiling for a few moments, “It’s been a *while* since I was starving. I’m not in the best shape because the explosion did... something weird to my love reserves but I’d give it three days before any visible physical problems appear and a week before my body forces me into hibernation. After that,” Feather shrugs, “maybe another month before I starve.”

“You’re awfully calm talking about it,” comments Sharp.

“That’s how daily life in the hive is- was, sir. You fulfilled your orders with the minimum amount of energy necessary, then you got put back into hibernation until you were needed. If you failed, you got recycled via the crusher- don’t ask, it’s way worse than it sounds. Unless you were in the top hundred, of course. Being on the verge of starvation is the default state of a common changeling...” a sad frown sets on the changeling’s features, “I wish more of us got the chance I got. Maybe then we wouldn’t have to be hiding in-” Feather stops herself.

“Continue,” Sharp raises an eyebrow.

“No, sir, this is where I’m drawing the line. If I have to starve in prison it’s still worth it. Changelings have been escaping the hive for a long time. In pairs, in small groups, never in any noticeable amount so that the high ranks couldn’t simply order them to return and recycle the... traitors. That’s going to continue, maybe even quicker now that the queen failed so spectacularly. Even if the survivors return home and start over, more changelings will escape with the chance to live a real life where they’re not just tools for a job. I’m not going to lie and say that everyone will be able to integrate without harming ponies but there are changelings all over Equestria willing to help them. If I tell you where the hive is and your princesses go there and nuke the place, it’s all over.”

Sharp scowls but Luna raises her foreleg.

“No, Luna,” he objects, his calm tone gone for the first time, “While we were busy inside the dreamscape, two Nightguards died in their sleep. Fear-induced heart attack in both cases. I’ll have to ask Shining Armor’s assistant for the Royal Guard numbers. Once this settles and somepony crunches the civilian numbers *then* there’s going to be fireworks. This is *their* fault.”

Tender Feather shoots upright.

“Yeah?! And how many *changelings* do you think died in that explosion? You guys are still clearing the corpses off the streets! Do you think anyone

other than a few high ranks and the queen herself wanted to attack this city? 99% OF THEM HAD NO IDEA CANTERLOT EVEN EXISTS!" her outburst is cut short as the Nightguard standing behind the changeling puts a hoof on her shoulder. She takes a deep breath, "Look, I know this is hard to believe but the vast majority of changelings have never even seen a pony before landing in Canterlot. They don't know where love comes from other than that the higher ranks on occasion give them some," she shakes her head, "Common changelings don't hate you. Other than from the scarce hive mind information accessible to low ranks, they didn't even know *what* you were before the attack. To non-infiltrators, pony was just a word."

"Sharp, leave it," says Luna calmly.

He grits his teeth, takes a deep breath, closes his eyes for a moment, and his calm and collected demeanor returns.

The questions about Tender Feather's history keep coming for over an hour, Luna making mental notes on events to ask Zemi and Greyscale about later. When they finally run out of ideas, Luna adds one more:

"Since you changelings can seemingly share knowledge, could *you* give access to your mind to another changeling? Willingly I mean, and only to a certain topic."

"I..." Tender Feather hesitates, "I mean it's possible but a stronger changeling could easily access everything I know and-"

"Let me rephrase," Luna stops him, "Trust me, I know all about things ponies don't want to share with others or what dwells deep in their unconscious. I would like you to teach ponies to another changeling."

Tender Feather furrows her brows and it clicks to her.

"You found a survivor. A low rank paralyzed by lost access to the hive mind. Am I right?"

"Too right..." Luna narrows her eyes.

“Your Highness, I’ve been in a similar situation but I was lucky that a mid-rank was with the group when we escaped the hive. The loss was... crippling, but we still had something thanks to him. We knew the language, we knew some of your culture, and we knew where several pony settlements were. Hay, I had no idea what *cardboard* was for months,” she shakes her head, “I’ll help. I think this is worth the risk.”

Luna nods towards the mare by the door.

“There’s a small changeling with a stuffed toy outside, bring it here.”

The Nightguard leaves and returns shortly after, carrying a Celestia plushie with a changeling in tow, its face locked on the stolen toy scrunched in what Luna can only identify as distressed anger.

“It didn’t want to listen until I took this from it,” the mare puts the toy on the floor where the changeling immediately snatches it by a chewed-up foreleg and scuttles backwards towards the chair Luna is sitting in, *glaring daggers* at the mare all the way.

Tender Feather closes her eyes.

“It’s been a long time since I used this so it’ll take a minute,” her short horn glimmers green. In response, 65536’s stub does the same.

As Luna observes the two in direct comparison, she notes that they’re almost the same but the longer that goes on, the more she can make out the differences. Tender Feather is about one third bigger and has somewhat smoother features, longer and more slender legs, and a more pronounced feminine figure. Despite that, they’re still creepily similar, almost as if somepony crafted two ponies from clay and only made the most basic changes to distinguish them from each other.

“Done,” says Feather and wipes her forehead, “Whoah, that was a looot more difficult than I thought.”

“Thank-” 65536 clamps its hooves over its mouth, “I can talk again! I can talk again!” it runs over to Luna’s chair and starts bouncing up and down in

front of her, “Look, Luna! Look, Sharp Biscuit! I can talk again!” it hops into Tender Feather’s lap and gives her a crushing hug, “Thank you! Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Oof- my carapace...” Feather’s eyes bulge and she pats 65536’s head in hopes the bear hug stops. She’s wrong. The sudden influx of love she’s getting does wonders for the pain, though, “Ughh... just don’t go around thinking too much this soon or you’ll get a headache.”

“Huh, will I?” 65536 stops.

“Yep,” Feather points at the table, “Tell me, what’s that?”

“That’s... umm... a tay- table?”

“And what’s a table for?”

“It’s for... it’s for- ouch!” 65536 clutches its head, which makes Luna stand up sharply, “Hey, you were right! Why does thinking hurt?”

“Hop off.”

65536 buzzes down on the floor and immediately wobbles over to hug Not-Blue.

“What’s going on?” asks Luna, her eyes flicking from Feather to 65536 and back.

“It’s a low rank drone and the damage it took from being ripped away from the hive mind makes it difficult to share more information at once. It will have to learn and expand its mind on its own. I shared the basics of language with it plus some concepts but I can’t do more. It instinctively tried to access my mind to understand the *idea* of a table, everything that can be a table, every use a table can be, and it just hurt itself. The pain should pass in a few minutes and the confusion should clear up in a day or two. With the amount of love in that Celestia plush, it’s better fed than I am.”

“And then you can do the information sharing thing again?”

“In theory, yes. In practice, I’d rather not.”

“How come?”

“Knowing about things is way different than knowing things. I’m not good enough with mental stuff to share proper experience.”

“Ah yes, better to learn by experiencing than listening to a lecture, I understand,” Luna nods.

“Not-Blue is Celestia?” asks 65536, holding the toy’s neck protectively under its foreleg.

“Not-Blue?” Luna furrows her brows.

“Blue is Luna. Not-Blue is Celestia?” asks 65536 pointing between Luna and the toy as a way to explain exactly nothing.

“Yeah, *Blue*, I need some explaining too,” Sharp snickers.

“Tell us, Bluena!” the Nightguard mare by the door joins in, adding devilishly, “Or I will tell the small one that Celestia is really called Sunbutt.”

65536’s jaw drops. It looks at the solar cutie mark on Not-Blue’s flank.

“No...” Luna breathes out, “*You are all so fired...*”

“Even me?” asks Blazing.

“I’ll demote you back to janitor if you don’t keep those two on a leash!”

Blazing ponders it for the moment before saying:

“Hey, little bugger.”

“Me?” 65536 points at itself in surprise.

“Yes, you. Listen carefully.”

“Listening!”

“Not-Blue’s real name is-”

“No...!” Luna grits her teeth, realizing she called out exactly the wrong unicorn.

“-and has always been *Sunbutt the great, devourer of cakes!*” he beams at Luna, “Welp, I’ll go grab my mop and bucket.”

“SUNBUTT!” cheers 65536.

Author's Notes:

I'm not introducing new characters, I'm just referencing old ones.

Sharp, Luna, and 65536 are the main focus for this one.

And so, now we have context for the first predecessor of the changeling trials to come.

Also, it wasn't supposed to be that long but I'm not good at being concise.

1988, 9999: 1

“You’re awfully nervous, mister 1988,” says Hacksmith, spotting 1988 once again turning his head into the dimming shadows behind them.

“Yeah, well, after you get attacked by a worm-infested spawn of some dark womb that’s wearing the carapace of your species like a coat we’ll see how safe *you* feel out here in the open.”

“Eep!” 9999, once again riding on Hacksmith’s back, huddles closer to his neck.

“You completely forgot what I said before, did you?” asks 1988, giving 9999’s reaction a raised eyebrow.

“N-no...” 9999 gives up immediately after locking stares with the infiltrator, “Yes. Sorry, I was just so happy you were okay and still confused by not being able to speak... or think properly, too, for a while.”

“What was that about anyway?” asks Hacksmith.

“Internal workings of our species I’m not allowed to talk about without permission,” 1988 shoots him down immediately.

“Whose?”

“Anyone of high enough rank to give said permission.”

“Geez,” Hacksmith rolls his eyes, “Like when I was getting a zoning permit for that stupid greenhouse in my garden, just because it required plumbing.”

“What?” 1988 tilts his head in confusion.

“I’m not at liberty to divulge procedure information specific to internal employees of the zoning office of Stalliongrad,” the pony gives him a smug smirk, “See? That’s how you sound.”

9999 giggles, completely ignoring the dirty look from 1988.

“Look,” the infiltrator sighs, “Thanks for saving me and all, but our encounters with other species rarely go well because, you know, sharp teeth, glowing eyes, carapace, and most of us looking pretty much the same. This is a new set of circumstances forced on all of us, and until I know whom I can trust I’m going with years of shared experience screaming at me to avoid torches and pitchforks, okay?”

Hacksmith shrugs.

“It’s your call, horsebug lady.”

“You- I’m not-!” 9999’s snickering interrupts 1988’s irritated sputtering.

“Hey, this is a new set of circumstances and blah blah blah so I’m going to believe my eyes first and those eyes say that you’re the size of a mare, the general shape of a mare, and even the voice is a little too high-itched.”

“*Is not!*” objects 1988 indignantly, tone an octave higher. He immediately realizes that all he’s doing is giving Hacksmith even more ammo, “Hmph, fine, whatever.”

“Aww, just like my filly when she gets all huffy.”

“...ponies... grumble grumble... cocoon and suck them all dry... too good for them anyway... show you a filly...”

He completely misses Hacksmith whispering something into 9999’s ear. The drone scrunches its nose in an attempt to stop itself from snickering further and nods.

“You know, 1988, all that grumbling and scowling causes wrinkles.”

“I WILL SKULLFUCK YOUR SOUL’S ANUS AND FEED THE GAPING REMAINS TO ITS LARVAE!”

“...my everything suddenly hurts...”

“Swearing isn’t fitting for such a delicate lady, really,” the earth pony adds his two bits.

“Graaaah!” 1988’s eye twitches.

“Also, anal-tome-ally improbable,” 9999 crosses its forelegs on its chest.

“Wha-?” the nonsense stops 1988 like a brick to the face.

“Did you mean ‘anatomically impossible’?” Hacksmith’s brain hiccups as well.

“Yeah, that!” 9999 nods.

“...I’ll show you anatomically impossible... I’m a changeling... I eat anatomically impossible for breakfast...” 1988 resumes grumbling.

He stops only when 9999 carefully flies over onto his back and hugs him.

“Thanks for keeping an eye on me and making me able to think properly, 1988,” it says.

“...rassassafrasssss... too many sssssss... just 156’s orders...” mumbles the confused infiltrator, “...gonna choke you both later...”

“Didn’t think you’d take it that bad, chalk it up to cultural differences,” Hacksmith shakes his head, “Anyway, it would be a good idea to get it together and stop threatening us with pain since this is our first contact with your species. We’re almost at the camp.”

Chill runs down 1988’s spine when he realizes all this messing around completely distracted him from hearing the noise of bustling ponies coming from ahead.

Damn it, a mistake like this would have gotten me killed under any other circumstances. If not by ponies then later by any higher rank I’d be reporting to.

As soon as they clear the final line of trees blocking the view, 1988 starts examining the 'camp' in detail.

The central building - prefab, likely assembled on the spot from parts brought in during the initial phase of camp building. Hacksmith is leading us there, so it's going to be the foreman's office. The best source of information.

Lodgings surrounding its back in a C shape - old shipping containers filled with bunk beds and small furniture with "Central Stalliongrad Logging" painted on them. Same ones they use in Manehattan docks for cargo, just with added holes for air flow. Potential source of love-infused personal belongings. The entire camp seems to be set up for long-term living, months to a year, I'd guess, so there's no way some of the ponies didn't take important mementos with them.

Common eating area in front of the office - a long table with a tarp above it to protect anyone having a meal there from rain or snow. Probably useful for overhearing rumors but it's unlikely to gain any relevant information. The ponies haven't killed us on the spot so they don't know about the invasion, which also means their contact with the outside world is limited at best.

Cleared-out area around - useful for anything that comes up. Some supply crates lying around, can't see what's in them from here. Two foals currently setting the common table, two stallions hauling dry wood towards a big fire pit filled with ash. Fresh ash, so a campfire must be a daily occasion.

A large deforested area north of the camp - logs are lying everywhere, so that must be storage for processed lumber and an access route for carts.

Ponies are now staring and pointing. Resist the urge to shapeshift and run. Don't attract any unnecessary attention, the basics of infiltration.

Resiiiiist...

RESIST THE URGE TO PUNCH 9999 WAVING AT THEM IN THE FACE!

I swear that if that drone gets me killed I'm haunting it. I didn't survive a giant explosion turning my love reserves into acid while being launched like a rock with my wings nearly burned off for freaking hours to die here.

On the other hole, it's not as if it's their fault that they can't understand the danger they're in. They only know what those in charge let them.

Stopping in front of the office for a brief moment, 1988 takes a long breath and braces himself against the stares from ponies all over the camp who dropped everything they've been doing.

"What in Celestia's name is that?" asks a dark green unicorn with brown mane wearing a pair of spectacles sitting behind a desk under the only electric light inside the portable building.

"Hi!" 9999 smiles at him.

"9999, let me do the talking. This is important," 1988 spares the energy for a short hive link connection.

"Okay!" replies 9999 and the link closes.

"One of two reasons why I'm not still out there helping Uproot," Hacksmith looks around, "Wait, where's-"

1988 finally wins over his fear, experience, and common sense, and enters the office as well.

"-ah, there he is. Sawtooth, these are some new species of ponies that live in these woods or something. If we don't want a repeat of what happened with those silent fireball ponies in the east, you might want to listen to them. Don't want another indigenous tribe incident on our hooves."

"Got it," Sawtooth nods and looks at 1988, "Do they speak ponish or was that 'hi' just an accident?"

"We do," replies 1988, nodding, "I'm 1988 and that guy is 9999. The numbers are a cultural thing."

“Phew, that makes things a *lot* easier. So, what brings you to our camp?”

Okay, 1988, think up a fake story, then don't forget to synchronize with others if it works. Useful hooks? Indigenous ponies, unwillingness to open hostilities. Topics to be wary of? Anything that would contradict what 9999 told Hacksmith.

Quick re-sync with 9999 regarding what happened while I was out... aaand done.

“We were curious about what was going on around here,” says 1988, “We don't have good experiences with ponies. You find us rather scary,” he opens his mouth to show teeth.

“Is this your land? The logging permit CSL got from Stalliongrad didn't mention any risk of us disturbing any natives.”

“Oh, no no no,” 1988 shakes his head, “We're currently travelling around Equestria, looking for a place to settle for some time before our... our *religious beliefs* have us head back home.”

“Ooooh,” Sawtooth nods knowingly, “You're on a *pilgrimage*. Like that Seven Graces thing that griffons do. Oof, that saves me so much paperwork you wouldn't believe.”

“We haven't met anything you call a griffon but otherwise yes,” 1988 nods.

Feigning at least partial ignorance will make things easier in the long term and allow for mistakes and misunderstandings the drones are bound to cause.

“Then let me assure you that you have nothing to fear from us. We're only here to chop wood into pieces, not any other creatures. If your pilgrimage takes you through this area, I'll inform the staff to avoid your kind and not cause any trouble.”

“Well, you see,” 1988 scratches his head, “It's not that simple.”

“How come?” Sawtooth narrows his eyes in expectation of more paperwork he thought he avoided.

“You, uhh, kind of set up your camp... on one of our holy sites. We must spend some time *praying* to the old... quee- spirits.”

“Oh dear,” Sawtooth sighs, “Right here, really?”

“Well, not *exactly* here-”

1988 points downwards at the floor with a laugh.

Crap crap crap! What would be a good place for observation without being observed?

“-but it’s where you got all that lumber ready for transport.”

“That’s not good,” Sawtooth frowns, “We can’t move all that without stopping the logging operations. We’re on a tight schedule as is.”

“No no, that’s not a problem. If you don’t mind, we could just settle down on the south edge of your camp for a few days and pass through to get to our holy place. It would save us the time to clear out our own campsite. We’re just a little... paranoid about the torches and pitchforks thing.”

“Hmmm... this area is company property now, and I’m not sure I have the authority to allow this or share any supplies. I’d have to send a courier north to send a telegram to Stalliongrad-”

Contact with the outside world. Avoid!

“We could help you with your logging,” offers 1988, “There’s roughly thirty of us and, after two weeks of walking, it’s not as if we wouldn’t welcome a change of pace. I’d have to consult this with someone in charge but I doubt that would be a problem.”

An infiltrator like 1988 can clearly see the gears in Sawtooth’s head start turning.

Free labor, buddy. You know you want it.

“Hmmm, okay. How long?” says Sawtooth after some thought.

Religious bullshit lets you get away with anything, really.

“Unless we get a sign that tells us otherwise, only a week at most.”

“Then we have a deal,” Sawtooth stands up from his desk and offers a hoof which 1988 shakes with a smile, “We let you use the safety of our camp and you help us with our logging in some small capacity which we’ll discuss once your superiors arrive.”

“Perfect,” 1988 smiles, “We’ll go get-” he freezes, “You know what? Would you mind if 9999 and I stayed here tonight and went to get the others tomorrow? I’d prefer not to wander around in the dark and get lost.”

“I don’t see a problem with that, although I can’t offer you anything to eat or drink, and I can’t help noticing you’re not carrying anything with you.”

“Pre-meditation fasting,” replies 1988 immediately, “Don’t worry about us, we’ll find a place for the rest to settle. The carapace makes it easy to sleep on the ground,” he smiles, “Though it would help if you could spare a piece of tarp or something in case it rains.”

“I think I can find something for you,” he looks at the orange glow outside, “For now, feel free to join us at the campfire. Hacksmith, explain their situation to the others, will you?”

“Sure thing, boss,”

“Yay, no setting fire to us!” cheers 9999.

So, Sawtooth will doubtlessly want to hear Hacksmith’s version of events, which means he will likely hear about the thing that attacked me. So far, though, I can’t see any holes in our story which would pose a threat. Unless someone arrives from civilization with news about changelings. Seriously, it’s been three weeks, how often do these guys receive mail?

Gonna have to keep an eye on that, but tomorrow that's gonna be 156's problem, not mine.

Infiltration successful.

Author's Notes:

Drones dig, warriors punch, infiltrators erode society, prepare invasions, and manipulate ponies.

CH: 2/13 - Momalis

Author's Notes:

No fun allowed today, only lore.

Chrysalis rolls over on her back as a glassy-eyed stallion massages her hind hooves, and sighs. The slow but steady flow of venom-tainted love from him spreads through her veins, revitalizing her like a good, long rest. She doesn't even need to be transformed at this point, as the single stallion quickly took to her yesterday at the bar and invited her home in her disguise and let her easily completely dominate his mind already loosened by alcohol.

"Go open the door," she says out of nowhere, at least for him, but he doesn't have it in him to resist a direct order, so he does as he's told.

Two of the hottest fit mares he's ever seen are standing outside, each only giving him the briefest glance before pushing past him.

"Uh, how can I help-?" he manages to stutter out before Chrysalis says in a voice smooth like honey:

"They're with me."

And that's enough to completely shove any worries he could have had aside, replaced by pleasant warm buzzing inside his brain.

"Good colt," she continues, her voice reverberating in his head, "Keep it up and you might have a chance with all three of us. You know what? Why don't you go and get us a drink?"

“Sure thing,” he leaves the living room. When he’s outside, the two disguised warriors transfer all love and lust they gathered throughout the night, barring the barest minimum they need to maintain their health.

Chrysalis takes a deep, relaxing breath.

“Excellent work. Thank you.”

“...” the two warriors stare.

“What?”

“You’ve never-” 68 says, hesitant.

“-thanked us before,” 96 finishes the thought.

Chrysalis narrows her eyes before sighing and saying:

“Hmph, I suppose so...”

Nothing else. Not that the warriors had any reason to expect even the first part of the thanks, so they sit down on the carpet in front of the couch and wait for more orders. When the stallion returns with their drinks, the two warriors take him away into the bedroom while Chrysalis stretches, closes her eyes, and-

The darkness of the hive mind swallows her.

For a normal changeling, the sudden mental pressure would be at least disorienting. For Chrysalis, all this means that whoever has just assaulted her mind is entering the equivalent a Ninja Warrior arena mixed with a minefield filled with claymore roombas, alligators with miniguns, lava moats, and guard turrets manned with so many snipers each that the world’s tetris masters would bow in respect.

“Hmph!” huffs a voice Chrysalis hasn’t heard for over half a millennium, “Not bad for a love-starved amateur.”

“And here was I, thinking I’d deal with your shade on my own terms, *mom*,” she snickers.

“As if you were capable of *dealing* with anything, daughter,” says the darkness surrounding her, “Your race is dying, you-”

“No, no,” Chrysalis interrupts the monologue at the start, “I’m not doing this every single time I have to kick one of you out of my head. I already had this part of the conversation with myself, so get to the constructive point and-”

She concentrates.

“-SHOW YOURSELF!”

The oppressive darkness surrounding her disperses, revealing the completely normal darkness of the hive mind along with the silvery circles and lines occasionally marking the otherwise invisible “ground”.

Reality shifts once again, and the majestic changeling queen towering behind Chrysalis forcefully shrinks and appears in front of her.

“Those tricks haven’t worked even *before* my ascension, mother. Trying them now is downright insulting,” Chrysalis smirks.

Even when shrunk down, Chrysalis’ mother is still at least half a horn taller. She’s slim, without the oversexualized hips of her daughter, and exudes the air of superiority and grace even Chrysalis has to admit to herself she never achieved. Her mane and tail are longer, mossy green, and smooth, as if they had their own group of servants to take care of them at all times, which they likely did in her time.

The first Empress of the Great Changeling Empire, the great part being a perfect descriptor of how much of a failure the entire thing turned out to be. The greatest even.

Despite her being only a shade, the memory of a memory, her horn flashes green and Chrysalis feels a vice-like grip tighten around her head.

“So this is how you want to play it?” Chrysalis grits her teeth, her horn lighting up in response, “Infiltrator queen against infiltrator queen.”

“Are you still calling yourself a queen after running everything I built into the ground? After having your plot handed to you *twice* in Canterlot?”

“Once again, I’m not going to rehash the conversation with my own shade, and I’ve come to terms with how wrong I was to attack Canterlot again. However, since you’re so set on *your* Great Changeling Empire, let’s take a trip through memory lane, this time without the poison from the ten queens before you clouding your judgement.”

To Chrysalis’ surprise, her mother starts laughing.

“Oh daughter, do you think a changeling as skilled as I am wouldn’t be able to contain their influence? Pleeese,” she waves her foreleg dismissively, “Most of them were *warrior* queens. The only thing you need to block those from influencing you are *ear plugs*.”

“Geez, I completely forgot how arrogant you were over the seven hundred years.”

“Prove me wrong, daughter,” the mental pressure increases.

As much as she’d *looove* to just punch the daylights out of her mother, Chrysalis knows that the mental battle between infiltrators isn’t about that. It’s about which mind can use the resources of the body they inhabit to greater effect. Since there’s only one body in this case, words are the real weapons.

“Can’t,” Chrysalis shrugs, “Old warrior queens were dumber than a sack of rocks, I concede that.”

Her mother smirks. The first step to victory and gaining a body to restore changelings to their glory.

“The problem is,” Chrysalis keeps smiling, “That history proved that all of them put together still caused less damage to us as a race than you did.”

Her mother's grin turns into a snarl:

"You were defeated at the height of our power, the power I BUILT!"

"Not really. You were building a house of cards on quicksand. The Great Changeling Empire was doomed to failure from the start. It was a wild shot in the dark, our chance to either gain or lose everything. The problem was that you didn't understand your odds."

"I brought Equestria to its knees," her mother grows a little despite Chrysalis' efforts and looks down on her daughter.

"You remember it that way? Iiiiinteresting," Chrysalis keeps her cool, though, "I myself would call it a 'prelude to pissing off every single race on the face of Equus'."

"Changelings are the pinnacle of evolution," her mother rolls her eyes, "All other creatures are just cattle. We can harness the abilities of all other pony races, we can have the strength and fire breath of dragons, we survive all diseases better and we can thrive in climates fatal to others. Even after our death, none of our knowledge is lost. We are the ultimate beings. That's why we should be on top, not because of some old hags dwelling on past grudges."

"Yes and no. We need love to do any of that, and to do the really interesting stuff, we need *real* love. I know your plan was to enslave and breed all other races and keep them cocooned as food. The problem with that was that doing so would give us just barely enough love to... live. We wouldn't be awesome, we wouldn't be able to do *anything* you mentioned. Besides," Chrysalis sticks her tongue out, "Diet love or fast food lust. Bleh."

"As opposed to the nothing your hive has now?"

"Well, there's one thing I must give to you, *mother*," Chrysalis spits the word out, "You managed to unite the world. Too bad that it wasn't under us but *against* us. Besides, it's not as if the old queen's haven't tried it before, especially the warriors. You never learned that ruling with an iron hoof

always ended up the same, you just always thought it was them doing it wrong and that you would do it better.”

“I *DID* IT BETTER! YOU WERE THE ONE WHO RUINED EVERYTHING!” her mother’s eyes blaze with fire.

“I hate to break it to you but some of my generals used to be yours, and they were halfway ready to split off into their own hives even during the time of my ascension. They knew what your ambition would lead to, they knew what this led to before. Isn’t that why you restricted full access to the hive mind only to the top ten and above? So that no more high ranks would realize that over half of the queens tried something like that and failed?”

“Had I done that earlier, you might have succeeded during the first invasion of Canterlot before the traitors split off and left your hive alone to face Celestia.”

“Nah,” says Chrysalis with a rather amused expression, “They’d have just left earlier. The hatred of the old queens blinded them just like it did to you, no matter how little you’re willing to admit it, and it was the only thing stopping them from seeing clearly how nonsensical your actions were. Before, there was always somewhere to hide after a forceful attempt at taking part of the world over failed. With how far your Empire wanted to reach, there would be no hole deep enough to hide in.”

“So remind me, daughter, how did those *oh so smart* traitors fare after deserting you?”

“Do you even need to ask?”

“I just want you to recall what happens to changelings who don’t have a strong leader.”

Chrysalis facehoofs.

“Moss, hunted down ny ponies after Canterlot. Cryo, frozen somewhere in the north. Shadowstep, chased into the Griffon Empire deserts and killed. Vulcan, killed by Cryo. Annelid, executed by yours truly. Gossamer, killed

off the coast of Zebrica. Burrow, found and executed by my number One. Quake, scorched by Celestia during our retreat. Trance, killed by the undead in the undiscovered west. That one took some serious searching,” she faces her mother, stone faced.

“So, strong leadership or death,” she smiles, victorious.

“Eehh,” Chrysalis shakes her head, “I believed it, I believed it right until the point when I faced Celestia myself. Have you ever fought her?”

“Battle of the Sundered Gulch. She summoned a hail of fireballs scorching the earth as far as the eye could see. Vulcan’s hive, with their resistance to fire, was crucial in taking over the pony trenches.”

“No, I mean her. Have you fought *her* directly?”

“No, I have not.”

“I have, and at that point I understood. Unfortunately, the hive revenants were still inside my head so I couldn’t analyze what happened. She’s not a great mental magic user and I used that against her. What I felt...” Chrysalis pauses and shakes her head, “You will never understand how lucky we were that we lost. We never pushed the alicorn of the Sun to her limit, and that in itself was our only success.”

“What are you yammering about like a terrified larva, daughter?”

“We were *never* a real threat to her. You can’t be a threat to someone who can evaporate this entire world with a flick of her horn. Even as she lay there in front of me, she hoped she wouldn’t have to go all out. She wasn’t fighting me, she was fighting herself. When I broke into her mind, I understood that if she let go even for a moment to get rid of me, a second or two, she would turn the entire mountain into glass, if not dust. I have no idea what would have happened if her sister was awake for the invasion on top of everything else.”

The pressure on Chrysalis’ mind weakens as her mother hesitates. Being only a living memory inside Chrysalis’ head allows her to see that her

daughter isn't lying.

"Alicorns..." she growls, "Speaking of those, daughter, did you discuss your plan with Scream?"

"I did, she encouraged it and told me about the weakness of ancient Canterlot magical wards. Without her knowledge, my forces would have never been able to break through the barrier in the first place."

"Hmm, and she didn't warn you about Celestia's true power? As the alicorn of Lust, she could have had a clue."

"You don't think..."

"Our patron and 'savior' encouraged forming the Great Changeling Empire as well."

"Maybe she only wanted us to prosper?"

"Daughter, you said yourself that my plan was doomed to failure, yet from the beginning I had Scream's support and guidance. She never acted directly but her knowledge and future sight allowed us to win impossible battles. I don't claim to know the limits of her clairvoyance but I would assume she would have foreseen... *something*."

"Damn..." Chrysalis breathes out. The pressure draining her love disappears completely, "It's hard to believe that Scream, the alicorn who *saved* us, our patron deity, would be the one encouraging our downfall."

"She fed and stoked the anger of those before me, and she allowed me to grow as powerful as I did. Am I correct in assuming you're going all the way through the chain of memories up to... *him*?"

"I am, mother. I need to clear my head. The revenants of all the queens inhabiting the hive mind have disappeared, and things feel vastly different now. The original sin, the birth of changelings... I need to talk to him about it, whatever little of a memory is left."

“You know...” her mother lowers her head and, to Chrysalis’ shock, nuzzles her neck, “He was the only one who never hated Celestia for... *us*.”

“Well, he allowed her to do this, he allowed her to spread the curse to his entire race. He has no right to tell us who to hate or not hate.”

“Hmmm, is it you speaking, or is it what you learned from our ancestors?”

“Alright, mother, what do you know? Everything would be a lot easier if you were less cryptic.”

“I wish I knew myself, but in light of what you told me, and with the revenants gone, things aren’t as clear as I believed them to be. After our little conversation, I’m *somewhat* willing to admit my mental state wasn’t as stable as I thought. Be wary of *Scream*, my daughter. You have generations of failure to fix, you might not have any allies to call upon anymore, and even our gods might not be who they claim.”

“Moth-”

She’s gone. Chrysalis is alone inside the hive mind again, feeling a little lighter just like before with her own shade.

“...could have given me one last hug, you old hag...” she mutters.

When she opens her eyes in the real world, she instinctively connects to the two warriors now ‘taking care’ of the stallion in the bedroom.

“And here I was thinking I’d just have to deal with my own failures, not the entire history of our race...” she sighs, “On the other hand, maybe it’s a good thing it’s left to the only competent queen.”

Ecstatic Scream, the alicorn of Lust. Patron and somewhat of a guiding deity to the changelings since queen Shroud.

Was it all a lie?

1988, 9999: 2

“What to do? What to do?” mumbles 1988 to himself.

“...big ponies, small ponies, smooth pony, green pony, brown pony...” 9999, trotting next to him, keeps whispering to itself, “...green eyes, pink eyes, brown eyes, red eyes-”

“Good eyes,” Hacksmith puts a hoof on 9999’s head.

“What? Where?!” the drone starts turning his head repeatedly from side to side.

“In here,” the earth pony flicks 9999’s forehead.

“I’m not trading those...” it scrunches its nose in thought, “Maybe just one for something really nice. A real helmet maybe? Oooh! And an eyepatch, I’d definitely need an eyepatch,” the drone gives him an unsettlingly honest stare, “Do you have an eyepatch?”

“I didn’t mean- wait, you seriously thought I wanted your eye?”

“Awww... so no helmet and an eyepatch?” 9999 pouts.

“No pony wants your eye!”

“I’m confused now...”

“You’re messing with me, are you?”

“You ponies don’t trade stuff?”

“Not our organs!”

“But I left all my stuff at home, how am I supposed to trade if someone has something totally awesome?”

“No. Organs.”

“...can’t even trade eyeballs for something awesome...” grumbles 9999,
“...it’s not like I need both-” it suddenly stops and its untraded eyes go wide, “SHINY!”

Hacksmith and 1988 exchange confused glances.

“9999, we must-”

Whommm!

“Aaand off he- it goes,” comments Hacksmith.

“9999, get over here or I’ll tell 156 when she gets here!” 1988 calls out to no effect, “Oookay, a disobedient drone, that’s new,” he follows the vague direction in which 9999 disappeared.

“Don’t worry, my filly was the same when she was smaller,” Hacksmith smiles, “There wasn’t a day when I didn’t long for a leash to put her on.”

“Yeah, well, I doubt your filly was ever in danger of being clubbed to death due to her looks.”

“You’re overreacting,” Hacksmith picks up the pace to keep up with 1988.

“I’m not.”

1988’s cold tone stops Hacksmith’s further objections.

Bzzzt!

“Eeep!” they hear 9999’s surprised yelp and bolt forward past the corner of the office building to the area filled with stacked freight containers repurposed for living.

Bzzzt!

“Ehehehehehehe- eeep!”

Hacksmith stops.

“Shinyyyy-”

Bzzt!

“-eep!”

“You know, before this, I’d say that calling you bug ponies would be racist, buuut...”

Bzzt!

“STOP SHOIVING YOUR FACE INTO THAT BUG ZAPPER!” 1988’s eye twitches, he bites down on the stub that constitutes the excited drone tail, and starts pulling 9999 away.

“I’ll trade you all my sticks and rusty horseshoes for iiiiiit!” the drone desperately waves its forelegs at Hacksmith staring in disbelief, “You can have both of my eyes too! And a leg! You in the market for some primo hooves? I’ve got foooooour!”

“...recycle them all, recycle them all, recycle them all...” 1988 keeps grumbling as he drags the drone through the camp.

The earth pony walks with them for a while before tapping on 1988’s shoulder and nodding towards ponies gathering around the long table at the center of the camp.

“We’ll be starting a fire soon, feel free to join us. Sawtooth cleared it personally, so I’ll just explain to the guys what’s going on. Okay?”

1988 lets 9999’s stump go, saying:

“We’ll be there, I just need to slap some sense into this moron.”

“Don’t be too rough on the little guy,” Hacksmith snickers, “It was pretty funny and nopony was hurt.”

“Yet...” 1988 smacks the back of 9999’s head, “Are you coming or do I have to keep dragging you?”

“I’m good, I’m good,” the drone nods and follows the infiltrator away, “What was that?”

“A bug zapper. A device designed to attract mostly flies and mosquitoes and fry them with electricity.”

“It was so shiny and so... flowy. Like fresh goop.”

“Yes, a fraction of the light it emits is in the part of the spectrum only insectoid eyes can see and it flickers at a frequency-” 1988 pauses, “You have no idea what I’m talking about, have you?”

9999 lowers its head and shakes it.

“I don’t. Sorry.”

To his own surprise, he finds himself saying:

“It’s not your fault. I keep forgetting that this isn’t a two-infiltrator mission,” several moments of walking in silence later, 1988 adds, “I’m gonna teach you a trick.”

“A trick? I can do the one where I walk on my hind legs for a bit. When 4822 was bored, she made a few of us jump around for fun like she saw in something called a... circle- cactus?”

“A circus?”

“Right, that! She split us in threes and ate the one who did the trick the worst.”

“Yep, definitely sounds like a bored low-rank infiltrator winding down after a mission...” 1988 shakes his head, “Why did we do that? It was all clear back in the hive but...” he lowers his voice, “Half of the things I used to do to kill time makes me gag now.”

“L-Like what?” asks 9999 carefully.

“You don’t want to know,” he grits his teeth, “Anyway, I’m going to teach you how to adjust your eyes so that that damned thing doesn’t make it so that all of you drones are just sitting around and getting shocked all day... as fun as it would be to watch for an hour or two.”

9999 pouts at him.

“Hey, I’m against harming or killing you for no reason. That doesn’t mean I don’t get a chuckle out of you doing something stupid to yourself.”

The drone sighs.

“You know what? That’s fair.”

“Now, this is a warrior-level transformation, they use it to improve their reaction times. Luckily for you, it’s a fairly small upgrade and I’ll guide you through it. Your only job will be to maintain it,” he puts his horn to 9999’s.

Taking the transfer of information as slowly as he can, he starts changing the internal structure of the drone’s eyes. 9999 groans at the growing headache but before it reaches unbearable levels 1988 withdraws himself from the drone’s head.

“Owww...” 9999 sits down, breathing deeply.

“It’ll take some time to adjust.”

“Everything is... shiny and fuzzy.”

“Yes, I improved your eyes and brain so that you can process frames at a higher rate than before and see in a slightly different spectrum of light-aaand I’ve lost you again, have I?”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. The bug zapper is going to look different now, that’s all. Most other things should be similar to before, though.”

“AH?!” 9999 groans as a completely unexpected spike of pain surges through his eye socket and into the back of its head.

“Look down on the ground and breathe. Close your eyes if it’s too much but don’t do it unless it’s necessary.”

“Whuh?” 9999 does its best to keep its eyes open but eventually loses as its entire body starts trembling.

“How to explain it to a drone?” mumbles 1988, “You are seeing ‘faster’ but your brain isn’t processing- thinking faster. I made the increase only as small as it was necessary but without burning love to adapt it’s going to take time. I don’t know if a drone ever did this before, so we’re both working with little to nothing here.”

“Sorry...” 9999 repeats.

“Don’t worry about it, just focus on breathing. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does!” the drone hisses angrily, “387 picked *me* to contact the ponies and the other drones believed I could do it. They thought I wouldn’t fail them, as the only four-digit there. I can’t fail them...”

It surprises even 1988 that he himself doesn’t have the heart to tell 9999 that those ranks in reality mean nothing at such low levels and that it got picked from the line-up only because it was the only one not to back off quickly enough.

“Hnnngh...” 9999 groans again. 1988 leans down, only to see the drone’s teared up eyes forced open with its fetlocks and a string of green drool dripping from its open mouth.

He sighs, grabs its forelegs, and pulls them away. 9999’s eyes immediately close.

“Stop it. This isn’t about willpower, this is about biology. You’re just going to hurt yourself if you push it. Rest, wait, and try again. We’re in no hurry.”

“I can-”

“Did I hear you just disobey a direct order from an *infiltrator*?”

“No, 1988,” 9999 sits up straight, eyes closed.

“Good,” he picks the drone up and puts it on his back, “From what I’ve seen so far, this place is close enough to the camp and we’ll still have a good wall of trees shielding us from prying eyes. We’ll stay here tonight and bring the others in the morning.”

Carrying the drone back to the now roaring fire pit and the ponies gathered around, 1988 does his best to shrug off the mix of surprise, curiosity, unease, and downright fear in their eyes. What helps is Hacksmith arriving with two ponies, one pegasus and one unicorn, both wearing utility belts and jackets with ‘SECURITY’ written on them.

“That’s them, guys,” says the earth pony, “Sawtooth is letting them stay on the southern edge of the camp.”

“I’m 1988 and the dro- one on my back is 9999,” the infiltrator raises a hoof to shake which neither of the two security guards take.

“Strange names,” says the unicorn with the tact of a brick through a window.

“Our names translate as numbers into ponish,” lies 1988, “It’s a weird language thing from a long time ago.”

“Why is 9999 crying?” asks Hacksmith, walking closer.

9999 puffs out its chest.

“I’m not crying!” it huffs, carefully opening its definitely-not-teared-up eyes and gritting its teeth, “1988 showed me a trick so that the bug zapper shiny flowy thing doesn’t make me run off again. Now my head hurts really bad but I’ll get over it and when the other drones arrive they’ll know they can learn it too.”

The corner of Hacksmith’s mouth curls up, and from one of the few mares of the camp comes a quiet ‘awwww!’.

“Drones?” asks the pegasus security guard.

Read the room, muscle-for-brains. I mean, the clearing.

“Yes, a biological designation,” says 1988 out loud, “Workers. I’m a... *diplomat* is the closest translation that comes to mind, then there are warriors, and so on...”

“Oh, so why did I meet the little guy first?” asks Hacksmith.

“I can only point to my sharp teeth so often without getting a hoof cramp,” 1988 gives him a smug smirk.

“Oh, right-”

“Let me handle this,” the unicorn’s horn lights up as he interrupts Hacksmith, “The worker on shift with Hacksmith here hasn’t returned from his section yet. Hacksmith said you’re supposedly not the only members of your group around here. Care to explain?”

1988’s expression freezes.

“Uh oh,” he can’t stop himself from recalling the strange creature that attacked him.

Both security guards exchange glances and step towards 1988, the unicorn one levitating up a telescopic blackjack from his belt.

“Calm down, guys,” Hacksmith speaks up, completely ignored.

“Is it possible that Uproot had a run-in with your... friends?” asks the pegasus guard.

“...!” 9999’s sharp intake of breath and raised hoof makes them both look at him, “Maybe the thing that knocked you out found him too!”

Thank holes...

If I said it, it would look like making excuses but hearing it from a harmless-looking drone is a different story entirely.

“What thing?” the security guards hesitate, and 1988 suppresses a satisfied smirk.

“I...” his internal satisfaction doesn’t last long, though, as he recalls whatever little he can from the incident and shudders, “I was following 9999 to make sure nothing happened to it, I turned around, saw a brief flicker of something equine-shaped, and then I passed out. 1988 and Hacksmith woke me up.”

“And it looked really scary!” adds 9999, “At least from what he described before.”

Holes damn it, drone! They won’t believe a horror monster scared me to death...

“Scary, you say?” asks the guard with expected skepticism.

“Look,” 1988’s brain is working overtime to save the situation. He points at the heavily fractured chitin on his barrel, “It was... weird. I suddenly felt cold, and I remember the shock it gave me. Hacksmith-”

“His heart wasn’t beating so I got on with the first aid the second we found him,” Hacksmith speaks out.

Now, I know you are the hired muscle but even you can’t think someone successfully faked a heart attack.

“Then we need to go and check out your section immediately,” the pegasus glances Hacksmith’s way.

“We can come with-” offers 9999.

“No,” the pegasus refuses immediately, “You two are staying here. Something might have happened to an Equestrian citizen and you could be involved. Don’t try to escape!”

That went south quickly.

“Let’s go, Hack,” the unicorn’s horn flashes and summons a ball of light hovering over him. He nods to the pegasus, “You keep an eye on these two.”

As the guard leads them to the now roaring campfire, 1988 can’t stop himself from sighing.

Whatever’s going on, if they don’t come back we’re in deep goop.

Minutes drag on, eventually stretching into hours. The forest is pitch black now as the moonlight can barely penetrate the canopies past the area cleared out for the logging camp. Of course, that’s a problem for ponies, not for changelings and their near-perfect night vision.

1988 is sitting on a bench, his back propped against the long table. Next to him, 9999 is curled up into a ball, its small chest peacefully rising up and down and its foreleg twitching occasionally.

It didn’t take even us this long to get here. Something happened to them.

“...that’s really bad...” he quietly breathes out, staring into the line of trees, unbothered by the darkness.

His ears twitch as he hears distant cracking of branches which grows closer and closer at alarming speed.

Someone isn’t sneaking, they’re running.

He jumps up on all fours, his sudden movement making the pegasus security guard on night watch freeze and look his way.

“What’s g-” he catches the noise too, “What the hay?”

Said someone isn’t alone. It’s a group.

Like tiny stars dotting the night sky, hive links start opening in 1988's mind. On reflex, he nudges 9999, waking the drone up.

"Whuh- uh-" it's head snaps upwards, eyes blinking in confusion, "Everyone?"

"GO GO GO!" they hear from the darkness.

The pegasus darts towards the corner of the makeshift roof above the long table and pulls repeatedly on a rope hanging there. The noise of a tolling bell rings through the camp, and within a few moments, the central clearing fills with ponies carrying axes, knives, and bats.

They all raise them, because the first thing that appears in the darkness are dozens of glowing teal eyes. Before anything worse happens, though, the first incoming changelings come into view with Uproot and Hacksmith on their backs and the unicorn guard propped against 8622's side leading the group, his horn ineffectively sparking and sizzling.

Sawtooth accompanied by the pegasus rush towards the group as 1988 scans the changelings for...

Neither 156 nor 387 are with them.

"What's going on? Why are you here?" 1988 asks anyone listening.

"NURSE!" Sawtooth calls out, and two stallions accompanied by a mare split off from the small crowd, rushing towards him.

Drones rush past 1988 towards 9999, each one already spewing its version of recent events.

"Youwouldn'tbelieveit-"

"-itwasscarybutawesome-"

"-therewereclawsandteetheverywhere-"

"-holesholesinspace-"

“-andthen156waslikepewpewpew-”

“QUIET!” yells 1988. The drones shut up instantly. The only two warriors, 8622 and 9013, of the changeling group salute, “Where are 156 and 387?”

“Got dragged into some weird holes by these long, sharp legs,” reports 8622, “387 ordered to get everyone we could out while the rest held the line. We followed 156’s pheromone trail to the camp which she sent you and 9999 to scout out and we found those two,” he points at Hacksmith and the unicorn, “with the unconscious pony. That Hacksmith earth pony told us he met you and we followed him. I think those things chased us at first but they’re gone now.”

“Okay,” 1988 takes a deep breath, “If 156 and 387 are gone, who’s in charge?”

1988 gets his answer from the looks of every present changeling converging on him.

“Oh holes...”

1313: 2

Zamira whistles approvingly as she enters the wine cellar where 1313 is held.

“Hmmm, no new bits lying around, no fresh puddles of blood-goo-whatever, and you’ve managed to sit up on your own. Are you feeling better or did I finally use enough bandages last evening to keep you from falling to bits?”

“A bit of column A, a bit of B, I’d say,” 1313 pushes himself on all fours. Over the past two days, he’s managed to recover enough for all the bits of his body to stay together.

Crunch!

Almost.

“Not again...” Zamira rolls her eyes.

“It’s fine, I think something just set in,” he stretches his legs one by one, “Ooooh, that felt good. Just gonna crack my neck and-”

Snap!

“AAAAAAH- HURK!” she manages to aim her muzzle towards the bucket she’s been carrying with her.

“My bad...” 1313 apologizes.

“Blurrgh!”

“You look kinda funny from this angle.”

“Bluuuurhg!”

“So... you gonna help me snap my neck back?”

“Ughhhh...”

“No no, it’s fine, I’ll wait until you stop throwing up.”

“Nnnngh...”

“Good accuracy, though. Most of it landed in the bucket.”

“Ughhh.”

“Might want to come back with fresh water and wring out that sponge.”

“...stop... talking...”

“Oh neat, you had eggs for breakfast? I thought ponies were all about vegetables.”

She makes the mistake of looking into the now unpleasantly colorful bucket.

“Bluuuuuuughrhgh!”

“I did a mission with a female infiltrator a few months ago in Manehattan and we tried eggs too. Our mistake was trying *changeling* eggs to save bits. We thought they would be infused with love because, you know, changeling.”

“...shut... u-HURK!”

“Yep, green, exactly like that. They were supposed to be sunny side up but it turns out that changeling goo and oil don’t mix that well and the goo just floated from side to side, semi-liquid, and spread evenly over the pan. What we didn’t see was the oil stuck under it catching fire.”

“HURK!”

“Pretty much just like you right now- BOOM, right into the bucket! Ever thought about going pro with that kind of precision and force?”

“...ugh...”

“Lesson learned - just stick to normal ones or grab some oats. They’re easier to throw up anyway if you don’t have the chance to transform your internal bits to digest them. It’s a pain in the plot to wash it all out with soap. You mess up the ratios and end up burping bubbles the whole morning, although I think it helped with the stage magician auditions that one time I worked for some blue unicorn mare at one point - she needed an assistant for her sawing in half trick. Her name was... Truck, Triscuit, Ticktits, something like that. We made quite the bank in Las Pegasus because all the unicorns were like - now open the box, it’s all fake, illusions, blah blah blah, so she opened the box and the entire first row chucked their dinners. Unfortunately, when the real unicorns became too suspicious, I had to take my share and leave. I think she’s doing time now for sawing her next assistant in half for real. She never quite got the hang of proper stage magic past colored lights.”

“How...?”

“I think using a chainsaw? You know, the old ‘rip it off like a bandaid’ mentality. I’m pretty sure that if she used a normal hoof saw like she did with me, the screaming would have tipped her off at least halfway through. I normally had to shapeshift my vocal chords and nerve endings away.”

“How are you *alive?!* ” the zebra has gathered herself enough to stop throwing up. That, or she just ran out of stuff.

“The normal way - egg, larva, chrysalis, changeling.”

“Now you’re just screwing with me.”

“Just a bit. Look, this is normal for me. I break easily, I fix easily. As far as I know, it has something to do with the old hives. Some of the old changelings had really weird adaptations and when they got picked up into one hive the traits remained in their bloodlines- goo lines? You know what I

mean. You ponies get blue eyes or a striped coat, and we get resistance to cold or a jigsaw puzzle biology. Speaking of chunks, are you done with the bucket?"

"I'm gonna need another shower and a second breakfast... or at least a breath mint."

"I can help with that. The green isn't just for show, our goo is kinda m--"

"FINISH THAT SENTENCE AND THAT BUCKET GOES INSIDE YOU!"

"I can turn my taste buds off and I don't digest things. Let's see which one of us throws up first when I start *chewing*."

"I miss when you were polite and happy that I stopped Blueblood from tossing you into a woodchipper."

"Sorry, I'm just messing with you, this wine cellar is pretty boring. I *am* happy about that and I *am* grateful you gave me this talisman thingy so that I could recover," he grabs his neck and with a cracking twist he sets it back into a position compatible with equine life, "Ahhh, that's so much better."

"I'm so glad I don't have anything to throw up anymore..."

Before their back and forth can continue, the clicking of the locked cellar door makes them both look towards the entrance. Blueblood winces as the acrid stench of vomit hits his nose but forces himself to go inside and slam the door behind him. With a look of utter disgust, he passes Zamira and looks at 1313.

"You, change-thing, are you healthy enough to transform into a pony?"

"Blueblood?" Zamira tilts her head.

"Does it speak ponish?" he only glances her way.

"I do," replies 1313 quietly, his mind immediately reverting into the infiltrator 'in danger' mode.

“So why didn’t you answer me? Do I need to order Zamira to break your legs again?”

1313 swallows any joking remark crossing his mind.

So this is the kind of idiot I’m dealing with.

“Yes, I can transform into a pony. Not for too long, though.”

“How long?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“If you start spelling the words, I’m out,” Zamira rolls her eyes.

1313 smirks as Blueblood flashes her a scowl.

“I want you to transform into me and stay like that until I say otherwise.”

“Are you crazy?” Zamira takes a step backwards.

“Why would I do that?” asks 1313.

“If you don’t, you die right here and now,” Blueblood shrugs.

Ahhh, holes. If I didn’t tell her about the healing, I might have gotten out of this in a few hours. On the other hole, I could have gotten cremated and there’s no coming back from that... I think.

“Ah, a negotiator,” 1313 nods, “Yes, I can transform into you. You’re not particularly complex as far as physical appearance goes. I can’t stay like you for long, as I said, with the energy I have left. An hour or two at most.”

Blueblood’s sudden sadistic smirk doesn’t fill the infiltrator with hope. His horn flashes, and a necklace with a big ruby appears in the air.

“Do it,” he says.

With some concentration and pained grunting, 1313's body bursts into green flames, and when those die out there stands a perfect replica of Blueblood, swaying, sweating, and gasping for air.

As 1313 does his best to recover from the exertion, the real prince puts the necklace around the infiltrator's neck where it suddenly tightens.

"Wha-?"

"This is an explosive collar," explains Blueblood. 1313 freezes, "Try to remove it, it blows up. Try to magic it, it blows up. Try to shapeshift, it blows up. Try to act like a bastard, there are a bunch of ponies in this estate and elsewhere who can blow it up with the right spell. Zamira will be one of them and she'll be with you until I return."

"Return?" asks the zebra.

"Yes. I'm leaving this forsaken city until they clear the bug filth from the streets and kill off any potential stragglers. Unfortunately, doing so in public would tarnish my reputation and, while I don't care about opinions of rabble, my aunt asked me personally to show up at several planned events to show that the pony leadership is intact."

"I see. And how serious was the concussion that made you think that having a changeling take your place would be a good idea?"

Blueblood huffs but doesn't say anything about his bodyguard's sharp tongue.

"That's why I said you'd be there to make sure nothing serious happens. If the changeling gets revealed, it'll be your job to get rid of it and send a message to me about what happened. My contingency plan is to say that I was replaced before the invasion and imprisoned inside my seaside manor."

"I *did* just tell you that I won't be able to maintain this form for too long, right?" asks 1313, straining to not simply jump at Blueblood while shapeshifting and blow them both up right there.

“Then you’d better try harder,” sneers the unicorn and opens the cellar door,
“Oh, Zamira?”

“Yes?”

“My full schedule is in my suite as well as the method of activating the explosive necklace, you will also receive a hefty reward from my personal funds in addition to what my father pays you for this once I return. Now, your first event is to meet with my parents who will be arriving to see if I’m okay in-” his horn flashes, “one hour, thirteen minutes.”

He leaves.

The infiltrator and the bodyguard exchange glances, both breathing out an exhausted:

“I hate that guy...”

“...they’re here they’re here they’re here!” 1313 starts hyperventilating as he looks out of the slot in the main door of the Blueblood estate.

The hoofsteps behind him do little to calm him down.

“Stop shaking, we can do it. Aren’t you, like, used to this?”

“I know *nothing* about my targets! I know *nothing* about the pony I’m impersonating! I know *nothing* about the circumstances of this meeting. This is terrible!”

Smack!

He touches his cheek reddening from Zamira’s slap. He knows she meant well, but...

“Ugh ah gh-”

Snap!

“-please don’t dislocate my jaw again. You’re stupidly strong.”

“That will never not be disgusting. I’m so glad I haven’t eaten anything in the last hour...” she comments, “Look, your life’s on the line and so is my *big* bonus from his father for protecting his son during an invasion that brought Canterlot to its knees. You’ve seen all there is to Blueblood, and *most* slip-ups you do should be easily explained by trauma. There is no ‘spark of good under the right circumstances’ part of him, he’s just a spoiled, bratty asshole. To everyone. His father, on the other hoof, is an upstanding guy. I’m working for him, not Blueblood, because that idiot couldn’t recognize a good warrior if his life depended on it, which it sometimes did so far. Blueblood made sure the guards his father recommended were all female and-” she winks at 1313, ”-pretty hot if I say so myself. He makes us wrestle in mud or oil on the weekends, that should tell you enough about how much he really cares about us ‘guarding’ him. Anyway, I digress, his father is a stuffy noble but an honorable one, and, as I repeatedly stated, he pays *well*. As for his mother, I’ve met her only once before so I can’t tell you much more than she really loves Blueblood. You’re gonna have to improvise there, but that’s your whole schtick.”

“I don’t-”

“I can make you go boom boom right now,” she gives him a smug, wide smile.

“-think there’s a single way this can go wrong.”

“See? You just need to believe in yourself more. And I’ll be here with you to help with any and all too difficult questions.”

“I can’t decide whether I hate or love you...” grumbles 1313.

“A bit of column A, a bit of column B,” her expression turns serious, “Now shut up and put on your official evil shape shifting horsebug face.”

As a pair of well-dressed unicorns enter the lobby, flanked by a group of twelve only unicorn guards, 1313 realizes that they’ve made a grave mistake right from the get go.

WHAT ARE THEIR NAMES? WHY DID NO ONE TELL ME THEIR NAMES?!

“...hello blast zone, my old friend...” he breathes out.

“What are you muttering to yourself, Blueblood?” asks the leading unicorn who, judging by his tall and naturally broad build similar to the prince’s must be Blueblood’s dad. Also, the same white coat, blond mane, and long horn are good enough of a clue. The strange part is that his mother bears pretty much the same color scheme.

Well, it’s not as if nobles don’t often try to ‘keep the bloodline pure’. Family trees? More like family recycling symbols.

“Just a sigh of relief that both you and mother are alright,” replies 1313. From the slightly unexpected twitch of BB’s mother’s head he assumes he did something suspicious but for the love of holes he can’t figure out what, and she doesn’t say anything.

“I admit I’m a touch surprised you’re in such good shape yourself.”

“Zamira and the others did an excellent job keeping me and the staff safe.”

Another fraction of a second of surprise from the mother but this time coupled with a slightly raised eyebrow from the father.

BB senior looks directly at Zamira.

“Has my son been hit particularly hard in the head or something?”

“No, Lordship, that’s just stress. It might surprise you about as much as a meteor suddenly hurtling towards us but he *did* hold off an invader who managed to break into his suite through the roof long enough for me to deal with it,” says Zamira with a polite bow.

I suppose there IS a little bit of truth there. He did scream like a little bitch before Zamira arrived.

“That certainly does not sound like him. Are you sure he hasn’t been replaced by one of those monsters while you were looking away?”

1313 freezes.

“Suddenly polite and *marginally* competent?” Zamira smirks, “I can imagine why you’d think that. Don’t worry, Your Lordship, once the whole thing settles down, I’m sure he’ll return to his old self.”

The infiltrator only waits as the two talk about him as if he wasn’t there while BB’s mother approaches him with a soft smile and wraps her forelegs around his neck.

Hmmm... it’s clear that they know how irritating their son really is but they still must be harboring some love for him.

And so, he carefully hugs BB’s mother back, and closes his eyes as the warmth of her love washes over him.

Until she hugs a little too hard.

“Ow ow ow ow ow...” he carefully pushes her back, “I’m sorry, mother. I love you but that bug monster beat me up pretty badly. I might have to ask Zamira for some training.”

Both parents’ eyes lock on him, their lack of attention allowing Zamira to quickly shake her head.

Okay okay, too far. How to save this? What would Blueblood...?

“And to keep a close look on the *assets* you hired to protect me, of course. After all, it *did* take her awfully long to get to me when I was in danger,” he adds.

Her eye twitches.

He smiles.

I’m gonna make you work for your extra money, stripey lady.

Author's Notes:

Okay, I think I'm going to switch to the usual one chapter per week schedule, since I don't really have the time to make any buffer. Real life is being a real ass right now.

1988, 9999: 3

As the sun rises up and bathes the logging camp in its light, 1988 fights off a bout of headache caused by all other changelings waking up. Being one of the lowest-ranked infiltrators of the hive, he knows full well that he wasn't made to ever be in this position, and his brain is struggling to function as the main hive mind node for all the other changelings around.

The stress of what happened last night can't be helping.

The ponies recovered from the arrival of the changelings rather quickly, and the medical staff immediately took Uproot away.

9013 and 8622, the two warriors whom 156 and 387 tasked to lead as many of the drones as possible away from the fight, reported what they knew, which unfortunately was little to nothing.

Supposedly, the main group was attacked by creatures similar to what little 1988 remembered seeing, but managed to repel the enemies.

"We couldn't harm them," reported 8622, "156 tried blasting them with lasers, we tried hoof-to-hoof but that was like punching soft rocks. We didn't break anything on impact but they weren't affected at all. We grabbed rocks, nothing. Sticks, nothing. Fire, nothing. Acid, nothing. The only thing that worked for a few moments was slowing them with our goo."

"How did you fight them off then?" asked 1988.

"We didn't, they just vanished. A few moments later, 387 returned, scorched and beaten up, saying he fought something big," she lowered her voice so that none of the onlooking ponies could hear him, "He said it looked like that pony princess the queen fought in Canterlot but that it *definitely* wasn't her. The weird part, though, was that according to him 31214 was able to hurt it."

“A drone hurt it where a high-ranked warrior couldn’t? That’s nonsense,” 1988 shook his head.

“It isn’t. When they attacked again at night, I saw it for myself.”

“What happened?”

“387 set up a patrol schedule and made each warrior or infiltrator grab a drone with them. Nothing happened for a good chunk of the night until a patrol noticed 387 tossing and turning. When they went to check up on him, they noticed a black... rift hanging in the air above and something like a mantis leg sticking out of it. So the drone flew up and punched it off.”

“Huh...”

“Exactly. Whatever the thing was, it screamed. A bunch of other rifts opened around the camp and those weird changelings with worms crawling through their carapace just started pouring out. We were completely overwhelmed, so 156 ordered a retreat. 31214, though, jumped into the fray to save 387 who just lay there as one of the things grabbed him and dragged him through the rift. A few other drones got really mad and punched their way after it. Unfortunately, that left 156 as well as the other infiltrators and higher warriors unable to do anything other than slow the flood of monsters. Last thing I remember before we turned tails, threw away any semblance of organized retreat, and ran was 156’s link vanishing. I ordered everyone to grab a cocoon if they could reach one and explored the route back. The monsters stopped chasing us shortly after. I am ready for my punishment now,” 8622 lowers her head.

1988 closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said:

“Set up a patrol schedule for this camp, use drones other than 9999. I’ll show you around. With the love we *don’t* have, we can’t afford to be using mental abilities. 387 figured out something before everyone else and I intend to use it.”

Thankfully, with Hacksmith’s description of unconscious Uproot’s state being similar to 1988’s, Sawtooth believed that the changelings weren’t the

culprits and accepted the increased security.

“What to do? What to do?” 1988 mutters to himself, “Ponies on one side, monsters on the other, lack of love bearing down on us from all sides.”

He steps over drone after drone on his way to 9999 and nudges it with his foreleg.

“Hmm?” 9999 immediately sits up, yawns, and only after all that opens its eyes.

“Follow me,” whispers 1988, “Let the others sleep so that they don’t waste energy.”

They stop at the southern edge of the pony camp slowly waking up.

“I need a report from last night,” says 1988 straight up, “8622 told me things from the warrior point of view and I’m not sure what to make of it. You drones were chatting until I sent you to sleep so you might have heard something 8622 missed.”

“I doubt that, but here goes...”

As the assembled ponies started returning back to the living containers and 1988 was busy talking to the warriors, the drones, almost as one, charged towards 9999.

“9999, it was awesome-” 57999 blurted out.

“-they were pouring out of those floaty holes-” added 36658.

“-and the warriors were all like aaaah we can’t do this!-”

“-and then 33125 was like KAPOW!-”

“-and boom, it’s head just came off-”

“-but it exploded into big worms and 387 told us a story about some shrewd old queen who blew them all up-”

“-no, you dummy, she melted all of them-”

“-and her name was Shrew!-”

“-Shroud, 91887, keep up!-”

“-so Shroud blew them up or melted them, we’re still deciding-”

“-no one’s deciding anything, you’re just a dummy!-”

“-I’ll show you a dummy, dummy!-”

“-I’ll end you!-”

“-not if I end you first!-”

“*Focus, guys!*” 9999 raised its voice, “What happened?”

“We just told you,” said 65661, walking around the two arguing drones now rolling on the ground and ineffectively biting each other, “387 told a story about some old changeling queen and it totally wasn’t disgusting and I wasn’t scared at all...” it tails off, shuddering.

“Something about worms, yes,” 9999 nodded patiently, “And then?”

“Then those weird changelings plopped out of the hanging holes and they looked exactly like those infested changelings that 387 was talking about. Like something was crawling inside their carapace, looking at us with hollow eyes, and when you punched them they just exploded into worms-hurk!” 65661 shoves a hoof into its mouth to stop itself from hurling.

“Yeah!” 13415 joined in, “But if you just closed your mouth and eyes and started swinging, they were all squishy and exploded all over the place. That sharp leg thingy was the scary part!”

“Sharp leg thingy?”

“Yup! It was hanging above the camp but when 31214 gave it a good whack all the monsters went nuts and just started dragging whoever they could back with them into the holes,” it scratched its head, “It was scary. Kinda awesome, though. We just kept punching and punching! How often do we get to punch something that doesn’t eat us afterwards, eh?”

“Doesn’t eat- you didn’t get hurt?”

“Nah, we’re all okay,” 13415 shrugs, “I’m still shaking and the things were disgusting but they just tried to grab us. They didn’t even have proper teeth, just squirming holes full of worms,” it sticks its tongue out, “If they didn’t catch you, they just nibbled on your leg or tried to throw up on you. It just kinda tickled, actually. And then you just punched them and they went splat!”

“But you couldn’t stop them from dragging half of you away...”

“Nope, too many. My forelegs still hurt from all the punching and running but it wasn’t much harder than digging a tunnel all day. They were much squishier than rocks. Plus we got orders to grab the cocoons and get out, so we did. We got almost all of them,” 13415 smiled with pride, “If you were with us, we woulda totally kicked their butts and then 156 would be so impressed that we would ALL GET THE HIGH SCORE!”

“Definitely,” 9999 returned the smile and looked around, “Good job, everyone.”

“Thanks!” said every single drone. Even the two on the ground stopped grappling each other to give him a hoof up. Of course, the peace couldn’t last long...

“Blew them up!”

“MELTED THEM!”

“BLEW. THEM. UP.”

“MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELTEEEEEEEEEEEED!”

“YOU WILL NOT BESMIRCH MY HONOR, SIR! TO THE DEATH! EN GARDE!”

“STOP MAKING UP WORDS! AU LAIT!”

And they kept going.

“I’m betting 3 orange leaves on 87461.”

“Hah, 2 twigs on 91887!”

“Who’s in charge of the pool?”

“I’ll do it,” shrugged 54331, “I only have this really flat rock anyway.”

“Bet the flat rock and I’m adding my own *bendy twine!*”

“You’re on! With two twigs, flat rock, and a twine, I’ll have my own sling and ammo! BE AFRAID, 9999, I’M COMING FOR YOUR RANK! YOU’RE DOOMED!”

“Just means I have to try harder,” 9999 nodded.

“DOOOOOOOOOMED!”

9999 breathed out a sigh of relief. Everything was back to normal.

“Hmph...” 1988 rubs his chin, “The key part is that you drones can harm them, but they can be slowed by gluing them down.”

“And they don’t want to hurt you,” adds 9999.

“That doesn’t seem right-” 1988 suddenly stops and blinks, “I need to have a chat with Uproot about what he saw. I think I have an idea.”

9999 keeps waiting for him to continue but it's in vain.

"First, I need to check out 156's camp in daylight with my own eyes. To be safe, I'm going to need the warriors... but I can't take both with me... someone has to stay here as a hive mind node," he starts pacing back and forth and mumbling to himself.

"I can come with you in case some of the monsters appear," offers 9999.

"No, you have to stay here. The ponies are somewhat familiar with you and I don't want to come back only to find all drones fried around a bug zapper. There's no reason to take everyone with me either," 1988 stops and raises his voice, "9013, go tell 8622 and whichever drone she's on watch with to get over here."

The warrior trots off and 1988 leans to 9999's ear.

"What do you know about pony religion?"

"Uhhh..." 9999 hesitates, "I think you said something about pogroms yesterday?"

"Pilgrims..."

"Yeah, that."

"Okay, quick recap - some creatures believe that there are more powerful beings or concepts which hold power over them, and they work to obey what they perceive to be their wishes."

"Like the queen," 9999 nods.

"Ye- no" 1988 taps his hoof on the ground. How would a drone understand the concept? "More than a queen. Like a super queen that tells even the queen how to live who in turn relays the instructions to us. And it's invisible... and you can't communicate with it... or rely on it... and it quite likely doesn't really exist but you still obey the rules because they aren't always completely bad."

“Umm... am I stupid or does that sound stupid?”

“Definitely the latter, no contest. Well, we are here because our beliefs in the invisible, nonexistent being demand we walk around Equestria and stop in some places we deem important and perform activities that have no real meaning but we think they do and that they will reward us at some point.”

“Aaand they won’t?”

“Not in any direct sense, no. At least unless you don’t believe in and obey something that can directly affect your life, like the queen.”

“Like if I’m a bad drone, she can send me to the crusher.”

“Exactly that. But that’s not what we’re pretending here. We’re going with the second option, the invisible and impossible to understand option because no one can disprove that one with logic or facts and that way we can do whatever nonsense we can as long as we say it’s our faith... and as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“Okay...?” says 9999, not entirely certain it’s getting the hang of it.

“Look, it’s easy. You know I told them we need to spend time in the north part of the camp. The real reason is so that we can keep an eye on anyone coming in with news about the invasion of Canterlot. I need *you* to make sure it looks like we’re doing some stupid ritual for a long time there while I’m away, that’s all. I have to leave 9013 here or you’d all forget how to talk again and I want to have 8622 with me for safety. Speaking of which...”

“No sign of enemies or the ponies attempting to spy on us during my watch, 1988,” incoming 8622 salutes.

“Good,” he raises his voice again, “Everyone, listen!”

All heads in the clearing turn towards him as one, ears perked and eyes open.

“I’ll be taking 8622 and several drones to examine the place where 156’s camp was. 9013 will stay here as a basic repository of hive knowledge. For

a warrior of his rank, it will be extremely taxing, so don't bother him. 9999 will be in charge. Listen to it, it knows our current situation, and whatever it says is as if I myself said it. Got it?"

He wasn't expecting the number of stunned gasps coming from all the drones including 9999.

"Hide the cocoons, obey 9999, don't mess up. That's all," he points at several drones at random, "You're coming with us. 8622, let's go."

The drones stare in shocked silence as the small group leaves. 9013 lies down in the center of the clearing, closes his eyes, and begins fighting the incoming pressure in the back of his skull.

As soon as 1988's group is out of sight, all remaining drones stand up as one and charge towards 9999 who can only say a surprised-

"Wha-?"

-before it's grabbed by a bunch of hooves and tossed into the air.

"HIGH SCORE! HIGH SCORE! HIGH SCORE!" they start chanting, catching 9999 and throwing it upwards over and over.

"I am *faaaar* from the high score, guys," laughs 9999, "Let's not go cra-OW! You didn't have to let me drop, though."

It finds itself surrounded by the remaining drones.

36658 spits out a piece of bark, and asks:

"Does anyone even remember the high score?"

"I heard it was something around 9 thousand..." says its bark-eating follower 57999.

"-more like 8 thousand-"

“-definitely 8 or 9-”

“-it was one hundred percent a number!” adds 54331 helpfully.

“*Anyway!*” 36658 raises its voice, “It’s definitely a 4-digit thing, right?”

Everyone nods.

“*Buuuut*, and hear me out here, have you ever even heard of a drone who was in charge of a warrior, hmmm?” 36658 wiggles its eyebrows at everyone meaningfully.

Slowly, realization dawns on the faces of everyone and they exchange *absolutely astonished* glances.

“That’s even better than a high score! That’s the *highest* score!” cheers 33125, “That’s so high, it might even...” it lowers its voice into a conspiratory whisper, “...deserve a *name!*”

“Guys, if literally *any* non-drone finds out, I’m gonna be *lucky* if I make it to the crusher,” 9999 shakes its head, raising its forelegs defensively.

“Then it has to be *a name they won’t expect!*” continues the whispering.

“That’s it!” 33125 smiles victoriously from ear to ear, “I got it.”

“I’m so eaten...” sighs 9999.

“The name will be...” 33125 pauses for effect, “High Score! That way no high ranks will ever know what we’re talking about but we will!”

“Wh-” 9999 blinks. It blinks again. It wants to object but... but that isn’t *the worst* idea, actually. Plus, even it has to admit, when has a hive drone ever had a real name?

“If you all agree then,” 9999 waits for them all to nod and glances at seemingly sleeping 9013 in the back, “then I accept. Thanks, guys.”

I mean, a name is a LOT but still, it's not as if any high ranks will really care enough to figure out what's going on.

Right?

Yeah, it'll be okay.

In the late afternoon, 1988 returns, leading the group.

First check - the cocoons are untouched, 9013 is sleeping and he can feel the warrior's hive link with no trouble.

Second check - there's no chaos, ponies aren't running away on sight or throwing anything.

It seems that 9999 didn't go crazy with power and everything is absolutely fine.

At least until the drone in question rounds the corner from the office building wearing a... coronet made of twigs with a flat rock fastened to it with twine and carrying a switched off bug zapper on its back, followed by a procession of all the other drones marching in lock step behind it.

"Uh, hi," 9999 smiles nervously, "I sensed you were coming back and I'm happy to report that everything's fine."

1988 nods.

"I must admit I'm a bit surprised that nothing and no one is on fire."

36658 steps up from the small squad of drones, pouting.

"As if High Score the Shiny-bringer would ever make a mistake like that!"

"All hail the Shiny-bringer!" the drones behind it kneel, bow, and chant in perfect unison, "The hole-iest of drones!"

1988's jaw drops.

9999 gets a brief flash of impending doom in comparison to which a thousand crushers would be a blessing.

“I, um, tried to explain your whole religion idea to them... and it may...
OR MAY NOT have gotten a little out of hoof...”

“...” 1988 and 8622 silently exchange glances.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?”

Author's Notes:

You wanted a changeling religion?

BOW BEFORE DRONE JESUS!

CH: 3/13 - Whisper

Chrysalis has been gathering love for the next encounter for the bigger part of the week herself. While 96 and 68 proved capable at lurking through the night clubs of Manehattan, her previous experiences at fighting the shades inside her head proved that she would need more love to prevail without being completely useless afterwards.

After diving into the darkness, the next shade is already there, waiting for her. A familiar one once more.

“Huh, grandma Whisper...”

The moss-colored queen with grey mane bearing a gold tint only replies:

“Chrysalis...”

“Is that all? No comments about me being a failure and that you would do better?”

“I will leave that to the others and their inflated egos,” Whisper chuckles, “My daughter called me a bitch slinking away after being beaten all the time before her ascension to queenhood. It took all my self-control not to eat her. Besides, I had the pleasure of throwing it back in her face for the last 700 years and, if I recall correctly, you ate some of that ire yourself.”

“I certainly did, grandma, I did. So, just to be sure, no trying to take over my body to give the real world a second shot?”

Whisper sits down and stretches with a long yawn.

“How much do you know about the hive during *my* rule, Chrysalis?”

“I admit that things are extremely hazy past my own life experiences. The rage of the old queens-”

“You can call it the *impotent rage of the old bats who failed at everything they touched and would end up exactly the same if they had a second shot-*” she looks up into the darkness of the hive mind as if interrupted by a chorus of furious voices, and smiles a purely happy smile, “Ahhh, it feels so nice to be able to think without their screaming in the back of my already nonexistent head. I don’t envy whoever has the real hive mind revenants in their head now. All I can hope for is that their stupidity leads them to a place where they have nowhere to jump anymore and where their last remaining host starves to death.”

As satisfying as it is to hear someone else voice her own opinion on the matter, every moment here is draining for Chrysalis and she’s spent far too much time in Manehattan already.

“Grandma, what did you mean by the time of your own rule? I hatched during the first spread of my mother’s dream of the Changeling Empire. We were starting to take over villages here and there but we still lived back in the Badlands hive. I-” Chrysalis sighs, “Whenever I try to recall my trips through the hive mind, it’s all just ‘DEVOUR THE PONIES!’ and only the barest knowledge of the world. The rage is everywhere else with the exception of the... the beginning.”

“Ah yes, queen Shroud,” Whisper nods. Chrysalis gives her only the briefest of puzzled glances.

Does she not know?

“Was there no one before Shroud? Is she the first changeling qu- ruler?” probes Chrysalis.

“Indeed,” Whisper nods, “The queen who trusted Celestia’s promises of cooperation and peace and learned the harsh truth about the world - unless its ruler’s will is absolute, no faction can be trusted.”

“You’re rather calm about it. Aren’t you blaming Celestia for creating us?”

“Creating us?” Whisper shakes her head, “I didn’t peg you as the type for theatrics. We lived side by side with ponies under Shroud just as they lived

under Celestia. Granted, we had to do our feeding in secret, at least those who weren't in a position to get love for free, but it was still vastly better than being needlessly antagonistic. Besides, it was a time of war against the newly established Griffon Empire and ponies feared the meat eaters way more than some weird horsebugs," Whisper chuckles again, "Well, at least until our feeding habits got out. Celestia was on our side but *someone* wasn't, and eventually the ponies grew to see us in the same way as the griffons - a species that wants to enslave and eat them with the added horror of us being able to transform into a pony and replace them," Whisper shrugs, "Population controlled by fear was pointed in the direction of an enemy who looked different. Honestly, from what I managed to untangle from the mess that's our hive mind, some pony nobles just wanted to use us as a proof that Celestia's attempts at peace and coexistence were a sign of weakness and take her place. It's not as if unicorns weren't doing the same thing throughout early pony history to pegasi, thestrals, earth ponies, flutterponies, hippogriffs, kirins, and every other species they considered 'lesser'. Standard divide and conquer strategy."

She knows a lot more about the world but she still thinks Shroud was the first queen...

Or was I lied to?

How does Scream fit into this, if my mother warned me about her?

"Hmmm. Do you know anything about our race *before* Shroud? Where did we live? What did we do? Anything?"

"I must admit I don't. The hive mind was already toxic enough in my time and gaining any knowledge with some degree of certainty was a miracle. It can also be that we were split into small, irrelevant hives which Shroud united and didn't bother burdening the hive mind with remembering those parts. I can't say. To be honest, I always preferred looking forward into the future, trying to figure out a way to save us from the horrible line of screw-ups that Carapace started when she tried to invade the griffons. Warrior queens, am I right?" she raises a hoof for a high-one which Chrysalis smacks with a smirk of her own.

“One might say you succeeded, grandma. At least for a time.”

“No, my daughter did. I saved what little I could after my mother Hiss had to retreat back to the Badlands. Not to stroke my own ego too much, but the vast majority of hive procedures, rules, and habits are my doing. We survived with next to no love only thanks to proper discipline and management.”

“The queen of changeling bureaucracy,” Chrysalis can’t help taking a jab.

“I take that as a compliment, little filly,” Whisper reaches out and smacks Chrysalis in the back of her head.

“You *do* know that I’m literally at least 7 times older than any other queen who ever lived, right? I *know* you know that, you’re inside my head.”

“You’re my granddaughter and that’s that,” Whisper huffs before smiling and pulling Chrysalis into a hug.

“I’m still on edge because a part of me thinks you’re trying to trick me and I can’t blame that part, especially facing myself and my mother in here,” Chrysalis freezes.

“As I said, I know the situation you’re in. You yourself said it - you are old, older than any of us. You’re not that smart-”

“Hey!”

“If you were, you would have learned from your mother’s and your own mistakes *before* repeating them and getting bubbled out of Canterlot, wouldn’t you?”

“Smartass...”

“But you should know that your own age doesn’t mean that much when half of your head is the even longer-lived line of other queens with hundred times your experience. What the common changelings won’t ever understand is that the queen isn’t *a* changeling, she is *the changeling*, the race, its knowledge, its experience, its hope. Unfortunately, I wish more

queens understood what it really meant before it was time to throw it all away.”

“I have to, grandma.”

“I know, I know,” Whisper nods, “But maybe you’ll be able to write a better chapter of changeling history with only the barest knowledge of the previous ones instead of being burdened by the pain of living through them, even as someone else,” she stands up, “Well, I guess I’ve been staving off death for long enough-”

“Wait!”

“Hmm?”

“I need to know one more thing before you go. What do you know about Scream?”

“Our protector? During my time, she sometimes informed us about what was going on on the surface. The queens from more... tumultuous times have more experience with her. My only major contact with her was when she guided us through the construction of my throne. You know, the one that blocks all magic that doesn’t belong to changelings.”

“I’ve always felt really weird when sitting or lying on it, cushions or not...”

“It’s from a kind of extremely rare crystal called istrium. We had to mine it all the way north under mount Everhoof. Supposedly, its presence instills remarkable fear in other species but our hive link connections protect us from it and our innate energy manipulation allows us to ignore its magic draining properties,” Whisper shrugs, “That’s why ponies never found us after my mother had to retreat here and I bashed her skull in when she started eating most of the hive to keep herself alive and strong.”

“Huh. So you don’t think Scream had an ulterior motive for helping us?”

“Filly, she’s an *alicorn*. The entire history of our hive mind is only the tiniest blip on the timeline of her life. *Of course* she wasn’t doing it out of

the pure goodness of her heart but I wasn't going to bitch about the pony keeping my race alive and risk making her rethink that decision," Whisper rolls her eyes.

"You know what? I can get behind that," this time it's Chrysalis who pulls the other queen into a hug and stays like that until there's nothing left but empty darkness.

When she opens her eyes again, the now more than familiar ceiling of the Manehattan apartment is there.

She's weaker than before the conversation but not exhausted like after mentally fighting during the previous two.

"Are you okay, Your Majesty?" asks 68 standing on guard by her side.

Chrysalis wipes her eyes.

"Liquid pride, 68, that's all."

Author's Notes:

Just a short step backwards through changeling history, nothing big this week.

65536: 8

One might be surprised but being able to understand most words definitely doesn't mean understanding what's being said. 65536 learned that pretty quickly during the second part of Tender Feather's hearing. Big words and phrases like 'legislative' and 'framework for oversight and gradual integration and potential assimilation' went right past the changeling drone dizzy from the transfer of knowledge, so it made the executive decision to simply curl up with Not-Blue, close its eyes, and nod off.

High ranks were talking and when they needed something, they would tell it.

Speaking of which, what rank is Luna? What rank is Sharp? Ponies are soft, squishy, and colorful, but they could learn a thing or two from us changelings. You can't beat numbers when you want things to make sense.

The clicking of a door wakes 65536 up and it realizes that Luna must have carried it off back into her suite. A quick look through its shimmering but invisible forelegs confirms it just as the spell ends and the legs turn all black and hole-y as they should.

"Ah, you're awake," Luna's telekinesis grips 65536 and puts it down on the floor.

"Nuh uh, I'm 65536!" 65536 shakes its head, "And you're Luna!"

From the door, Sharp Biscuit snickers.

"You're going to regret teaching the little smartass to talk soon enough."

65539 sticks its tongue out at him.

"No, she won't! This way I can tell her what I carried where, how long of a tunnel I dug, that I got away from the big bad worm thing that eats careless

drones. I can tell her *all the things!* I kept trying to mind beam all that to you before but it didn't work..."

"Mind beam?" Sharp asks, glancing Luna's way as she takes off all her regalia and begins lighting small incense burners hanging above the bed.

"I think the high ups call it a hive link but 'mind beam' sounds so much cooler! WoOoOooo!" it waves its forelegs in his direction while scrunching its muzzle in concentration.

"Interesting-" begins Sharp but gets interrupted by Luna.

"As much as I would like to stay up and discuss everything we've learned today, I have this creeping feeling that the dreamscape is going to be *boiling* tonight and that I'm going to need all the power I can get to be able to fight the tantabus and the dreamweavers."

"Oh oh oh!" 65536 hops up and down, raising its foreleg, "I can help! I made the tinnitus eat itself last time!"

"I know, but that also means it will be ready," Luna shakes her head, "No, I have a different job for you."

"Is it digging? I *like* digging!"

"Please don't dig anything anywhere inside the castle unless explicitly asked," states Sharp flatly.

"Alrighty then! What do you need me to carry where?" 65536 turns its head in excitement, looking from Luna to Sharp and back.

"No, it's not carrying anything either at the moment," says Luna and can't help cracking a smile as the look of complete puzzlement crosses the drone's face.

"Buuuut Imma drone. We dig, we carry, we get eaten- oh..." its ears fold back as its entire body slumps, hugging its plushie, "I see... I mean, can I have a few moments with Not-Blue before-"

“No mortal or immortal creature is eating you and if anyone tries to as much as nibble on you I will rain down fire and brimstone and drop the moon on the world so hard they will envy the dinosaurs and Sharp will rip the ballsack of anyone even suggesting such a stupid thing and use it as a punching bag in front of their potential *grandfoals* from other timelines while laughing at their terrified weeping FACES AND THE LAMENTATION OF THEIR MARES!” Luna finishes the loud rant with glowing eyes, heavy breathing, and lightning striking outside the window despite the clear sky.

“Uhhh... are you okay, Luna?” Sharp realizes he unconsciously backed up all the way into the closed door.

“My noggin hurts from so many words...” 65536 rubs its temples, although the conclusion that it’s quite likely *not* getting eaten helps a ton to improve its mood. That’s one thing ponies *shouldn’t* learn from changelings, if possible.

“A-hem,” Luna’s eyes stop glowing with eerie white light and the entire room seems to warm back up again, “Relax, nopony is eating you. What I meant was that if we are to show ponies that changelings aren’t just the dark swarm they saw blot out the sky a few days ago, you’re going to need to learn some things. *However*, I can’t take care of you for the rest of the day.”

“That’s no problem, Luna-” offers Sharp.

“And neither can Sharp,” Luna interrupts him, “At night, you will take Blazing and the rest of the search party along with Tender Feather to contact the changelings she mentioned. We need to know the state of the non-hive changelings in our city. I don’t want any of you to get into a potential negotiation without getting any sleep and I’m still wary of fully entrusting 65536 to any other Nightguards- yes?” she stops, noting 65536’s raised foreleg.

“Umm, I can just lie down and rest. That’s what we do when no one wants anything from us,” it rubs its head, “My head still hurts from Tendy linking up with me anyway...”

Luna and Sharp exchange glances.

“Then I guess it’s settled,” she nods, approaching the bed, “I only ask you to be careful. I made everything in my power to keep this suite isolated from both the light and noise outside and the burning incense will help me sleep but I still do wake up easily.”

“No worries, Luna,” Sharp salutes, “Good nigh- well, you know what I mean.”

“I’ll make you proud!” 65536 puffs out its chest, “I can do nothing like a chump!”

“Champ,” Sharp corrects it.

“I’m not a fizzy drink!”

“But you are still not asleep and Sharp is still here!” Luna, now lying in the bed with a mask over her eyes, raises her voice.

“Old mare Luna is on us. Flee!” she hears an overexaggerated whisper from a bat pony definitely not acting his age followed by a buzzing giggle, the scuttling of small hooves into a corner, and the suite door opening and closing before everything goes quiet.

Luna’s internal clock wakes her up just like evening after evening before. She yawns, stretches, sits upright, and takes off her sleeping mask with a mild surprise. As much as she trusted that the changeling wouldn’t want to disturb her, it’s still shown itself to be curious on the level of a foal and those aren’t known for their discipline and calm behavior.

That’s why it surprises her so much to see faint light coming from under the closed door of the bathroom without any noise of running water. A quick look around doesn’t show 65536 anywhere, so she walks over to the door, opens it, and her jaw drops.

“Hiii!” 65536 looks up at her from the tiled floor covered with scattered crayons and sheets of paper depicting everything from random lines to an almost photorealistic picture of Sharp Biscuit’s face, “Didya sleep well? Was I too loud? Was the light too much? I can see in the dark but the drawings looked weird so I went in here.”

However, no part of that is what made her freeze with a mix of emotions too complex to disentangle. The thing that hit her like a speeding train powered by a dragon on steroids was 65536’s looks.

It’s not as if the small changeling shapeshifted or anything. It’s legs and barrel are scribbled on with dark blue crayons, not even as one proper layer but just lines as far as the changeling could reach. Strips of blue and white paper are hanging from its tail stump, glued to it with a small green glob of goo, and the same goes for the changeling’s head.

“So...” she finally finds words, “Where did you get all that?” she points at the terrible mess on the floor.

“Sharp came back after you went to bed and gave it to me. Look,” it raises a portrait of a changeling drone that would bring a royal artist with a lifetime of accomplishment to tears.

“You drew that... with just crayons?”

“Yeah, that’s 52111!” 65536 beams, “We used to polish a tunnel together before it got crushed by a cave-in.”

The complete lack of emotional impact from the death of somepony the drone can recall with photographic quality gives Luna a pause but she decides to ask the easier question instead of digging.

“You can remember all those details?”

“Uh huh, ya can’t?”

“Trust me when I say that only very special ponies can recall visages to this level, not to mention straight up putting them on paper.”

“Then Imma very special drone!” 65536 beams.

“I’m beginning to see that,” Luna nods, “Speaking of paper, were you trying to look like me? Why?”

“Cause you’re awesome! Even better than Not-Blue!”

And that’s it. In the drone’s mind, the answer makes perfect sense.

“And why don’t you just transform into me?”

65536 scratches its head.

“I can’t. Dunno why. Whenever I tried, my head started hurting really bad, much worse than with Tendy, so I did this instead. This way Sharp won’t confuse us so it’s even better.”

“I see,” a swirl of darkness appears around Luna’s horn and vanishes immediately, “Now, good ponies don’t leave mess on the floor so clean up after yourself while I raise the moon.”

“Whoooooooooah,” 65536’s eyes go *wide*, “You can do that?! Can I watch?”

Luna ponders it before deciding on a little experiment.

“Not tonight. You still have some cleaning up to do,” she nods at the floor.

“Oh, right!”

No complaining, no begging, no nasty looks. So no, certainly *not* like a foal.

Luna leaves and does her daily routine. When she peeks back inside, the papers are stacked, crayons are in their respective holders, arranged perfectly as if freshly bought, and there are no signs of cheating. Yes, it’s all still on the floor but that’s only a tiny detail.

Drones dig, drones carry, drones have photographic memory, drones do what they're told, and drones can apparently harm dreamscape creatures in the real world which is impossible without master-tier magic or divine power.

Unfortunately, there will be no time for any more experiments tonight. Luna can sense ponies going to sleep and the dark presence creeping into their dreams using the fear of changelings as a gateway.

“Put the papers and crayons into your corner while I get ready,” she says.

When 65536 shuffles back into the suite with one foreleg and mouth full, Luna is already standing in front of a swirling dark blue portal hanging in the air.

“Now, 65536, you stay put while I'm away.”

The drone drops the crayon holder.

“Where are you going?”

“Into the dreamscape, like before.”

“Huh? I thought you'd just be sleeping like before. Are you sure I can't come too? Riding big Not-Blue was fun.”

“Not this time, little one. I sense turmoil for which I will need all my power, so I can't stay here and only project my consciousness. However, without my body here as an anchor, I might not be able to reappear here once the dream is over or if I need to escape quickly. If you came along, you could get dropped out on the other side of Equus or in the depths of the ocean.”

“Okay.”

“If you, by some extremely unfortunate turn of events, run into any trouble, ask any Nightguard for help or to bring you to Sharp. They will at least listen if you mention him even if you are a changeling.”

“Okay.”

“But don’t leave the room!”

“Okay.”

“And don’t stay awake all night!”

“Okay,” 65536 nods.

“Draw or something!”

“I will, I’ve got ALL THE COLORS!” 65536 chomps down on the crayon holder on the carpet and waves it in the air.

Luna smiles, takes a deep breath, and jumps into the portal which closes behind her.

Now left alone, 65536 ponders its options.

“Hmmm... sleeping or drawing?”

In light of not being particularly hungry or exhausted anymore and its pervasive headache dropping to annoying but manageable levels, it opts for... trying something else.

“So, Sharp is busy, Luna is busy, but they want me to be smarter and represent us changelings in good light.”

It looks around and its eyes linger on the filled bookshelf next to Luna’s bed.

“And to do that...” it floats up into the air, “These are... book thingies, right? They have drawings in them that tell stories. I wish Tendy taught me more but with how much my head hurt already she did a great job not overwhelming me.”

One book is partially pulled out and 65536 recalls it being on Luna’s bedside table at one point.

“Is this what Luna is reading?” it pulls the book out and opens it at random, “Uhhh... maybe not?”

One page is filled with black scribbles that probably must be words to read and make 65536’s eyes water just from a glance.

“MAYBE YES!”

There’s a picture on the next page. Granted it’s some kind of a super complex symbol with interlocking squares, circles, triangles, and some shapes which seem to shift depending from which angle one looks at them, all surrounded by tiny thingies which might be a different kind of letters.

“Now, this is a word-y book, not a draw-y book. Ya don’t color word-y books even if they have pictures. That’s not just common sense, not even commoner sense, that’s the communist sense.”

And so, 65536 grabs a sheet of paper and starts copying. The strange and almost living image resists but the changeling photographic memory wins and within an hour, the perfect replica of the symbol is on the paper.

65536 looks at it, ponders it for a moment, and then adds some small smiley faces, hearts, and moons for good measure.

As it turns around and starts flipping through the pages of the book, the center of the immaculately drawn grandmaster-level demonologist summoning circle begins to boil and tendrils of living shadows start creeping out.

The full-body mirror on the wall of Luna’s bedroom shimmers, and a tall white alicorn with mane and tail of living rainbow jumps through, saying:

“Luna, I need to speak with you. I just received a paladin report suspecting there’s a changeling operating... within... the castle...” her words get stuck in her throat.

She’s lived for untold millennia.

She's seen the horrors and wonders of the world.

She's lived within civilizations long gone.

Never in her life has she ever seen a small changeling with blue crayon scribbles all over it and paper streamers glued to its head and backside in the likeness of her sister's coat, mane, and tail.

What, however, makes her mind crash completely is that said changeling is attempting to bite a clump of black tentacles sticking out of a floating sheet of paper, and said tentacles holding several other rolled-up sheets and smacking the changeling ineffectively over the nose.

It doesn't help that when the changeling notices her, it jumps away from the tentacles which curiously stop swatting at it, and beams at her.

"Gasp!"

Did it just SAY 'gasp'?

It darts into the corner and from a small cot in the corner of the room it pulls out a plushie Celestia gave to Luna after her return from the moon 2 years ago. With it in its mouth, the changeling ecstatically rushes back towards her, trips over the toy's legs, tumbles forwards, and ends up in front of the alicorn's forelegs, looking up and smiling from ear to ear.

"Sunbutt!" it squeaks, pointing upwards.

Celestia's eyes narrow as she doesn't sense, see, or hear her sister anywhere.

"Where is Luna?" she asks coldly.

"She jumped into a dream hole and told me to draw but I wanted to get smarter so I tried reading but it was too hard so I drew a weird shifty picture and it spawned those tentacle things like the drowning wobbler back in the hive has but those are mean and eat drones unlike those," it points to the paper with tentacles hovering in the air like a jellyfish, "We're playing smack-bite. I came up with that," it beams with pride.

Okaaaay...?

“And who are *you*?” she asks, slightly more at ease from the answer.

“Imma changeling drone 65536!” the drone sits upright and puffs out its chest.

“How did you get here?”

“This big explosion tossed me through the door. I went all crunch but I’m getting better. Luna was a bit worried at first but she and Sharp are telling me what to do now. It’s not digging but you ponies have so many nice things, like colors!”

She nods towards the tentacles now somehow exuding an aura of innocence and pretending they’re not there.

“So, Luna went off dreamwalking, left you here, you drew a picture, and that thing came out?”

“Oh my holes you’re so smart! That’s *exactly* what happened.”

“Vanish,” Celestia’s horn flashes, and the tentacles disappear in a puff of smoke. 65536 looks at the now completely empty sheet of paper.

“Neeeeeat! You have a magic eraser. Can you teach me? I was worried I’d run outta paper to draw on but with that I wouldn’t need any more!”

“No, it is too difficult.”

“Okay,” 65536 shrugs, “I think I like being told stories more anyway because it makes the pictures in my head move, like that time when Sharp told me a story about the moon being a changeling. Well, he didn’t exactly say that but he said that it has holes and it’s made of cheese and we changelings have holes,” it raises its foreleg to prove a point, “And so I think we changelings are a kind of cheese.”

“I guess that does make sense,” Celestia nods approvingly, her horn glowing. For what reason, 65536 doesn’t know. The lights are on in the

suite, after all.

For a few moments, they just sit there, eyes locked on each other. Changeling ones filled with wonder and the alicorn ones, for no apparent reason, deep sadness. That lasts until Celestia takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and pulls the drone into a hug.

“Eeeeeeee!” quiet but high-pitched buzzing fills the room.

Eventually, Celestia lets go, pats 65536’s head, and says:

“Don’t tell anyone we talked. I have something to think about and appearances to uphold.”

“I can help ya hold stuff up! Imma drone! We hold stuff ‘n carry stuff! Swat we do!” offers 65536 with an eager hop up and down.

“I don’t think so,” Celestia shakes her head, “You have something else to do.”

“Huh?”

“...it’s been so long since I did this...” she whispers and the glimmer of her horn shifts into an almost liquid light washing over the drone.

“Wooooow, I didn’t know you ponies could... transfer... love... like we... d-” it can’t finish the last word before it keels over and instinctively wraps all four forelegs around Not-Blue. With a belly completely full of fresh love, it falls asleep immediately.

Celestia stands up, and telekinetically grabs the messed up plush toy of herself. When sleeping 65536 keeps hanging on it like a tick, she gives it a curious and ineffective shake before levitating them both into what must be the changeling’s cot.

A single flash of magic later, she steps back into the mirror and disappears.

Several minutes later, she's sitting in the empty throne room, lost in thought.

Luna and Sharp Biscuit found some and they hid them. A DRONE survived the explosion and yet no one else in the city found a living changeling since the invasion and both the guards as well as the paladins have been scouring every nook and cranny.

Her mouth twists into a bitter frown. After all, who would resist a chance for a little payback after failing so spectacularly defending against the changeling invasion.

Not a single living one... yeah, sure...

"Bacon," she says out loud to the empty air.

In response, a flash of golden light flares up in the throne room, leaving behind a grey, bearded unicorn wearing full plate armor adorned with symbols of the sun.


"Beacon, Your Majesty. What darkness is so dire that you called directly for the paladin grandmaster?"

Your own.

"We need to talk."

Author's Notes:

Something to start Monday off right.

Since I'm terrible with descriptions - this could be a reference to 65536's look, only with Luna and a changeling: 

1988, 9999: 4

“As if High Score the Shiny-bringer would ever make a mistake like that!”

36658’s insulted reply coupled with its defiant stare at 1988 makes 8622 step towards it, towering over the drone with fangs bared.

“Ummm... 99- High Score?” it dawns on 36658 that it just made a mistake which drones make *only* once, no exceptions.

“1988?” 9999 speaks up in an unsteady voice, “Can I explain-?”

“8622, prepare tonight’s patrol schedule,” orders 1988 and immediately hooks a jagged protrusion on the back of his foreleg into 9999’s own leg hole and starts striding away, pulling the skittering drone trying its best not to fall along.

Since it’s early evening, the camp ponies are still busy, either with finishing off their logging quota or preparing the central area for the nightly bonfire. Thanks to that, 1988 can drag 9999 to the back of the camp with the now mostly empty shipping containers, and with a flick of his fetlock unhook the drone’s leg from his own and toss it on the ground.

“You idiot!” he hisses, “Did you forget that 36658 mouthing off like that would be a reason to execute *all of you* and leave only the Silents?! If 156 was here, we wouldn’t even be talking right now!”

“I’m sorry!” pleads 9999, slowly picking itself up, “Please, don’t hurt them. They got a little carried away, that’s all. It was my fault for showing them the bug zapper in the first place.”

“Elaborate.”

“El- uhh?” 9999’s head isn’t working properly under the sudden pressure.

“Explain.”

9999 takes a deep breath to put together the only chance of defending itself.

“I needed everyone to stay in one place, right? But I’m not a high rank so I can’t just order them something, and 9013 was completely out of it. I recalled how I acted when I saw the bug zapper so I asked Sawtooth if I could borrow one. He said yes, and I hung it on a branch in the north part of the camp so that the ‘religious’ group wouldn’t run off or mess around. The Silents and about half of us drones under 13415 were supposed to guard 9013 and the cocoons. Several hours later, I turned the zapper off and swapped the groups.”

“That still doesn’t explain the kneeling and worshipping. You’re not the queen!”

“I told them about your religion idea and they came up with this! 33125 joked that I was relaying the words of The Great Shiny Ball who in turn spoke through you, and that’s why I could control the ‘small shiny’.”

1988 stares, jaw slowly dropping.

“...there’s just a button near the bottom...” he whispers.

“Well... a few were curious but I just turned it on whenever they wanted to examine it. Then I remembered you told me that religion usually punishes those who ask questions and want to know how things really work, so I told them that anyone trying to examine the shiny wouldn’t get a turn anymore.”

“Wouldn’t it be ‘anyone caught’ trying to examine the zapper?”

9999 tilts its head.

“That would just make them try to be more sneaky about it. I know us drones.”

“Are you *sure* you’re not an infiltrator in disguise?” asks 1988, shaking his head, and as he does it he hears a series of gasps. A look around reveals nothing.

“Thank holes, no,” 9999 shakes its head, “I’m still wobbly from the warrior eye transformation you taught me-”

More gasps.

“...9999candoawarriortransformation?!”

“...it’sHighScoreyouheretic...!”

“...it’sadronelikeus...”

“...that’sexactlywhatahereticwouldsay...”

This time, 1988 turns his head in time to see a totem of drone heads peeking from around a corner of the cargo container, looking up and down on each other and whispering.

“A-hem!” the infiltrator clears his throat.

“Eep!” the drone heads retract behind the corner, followed by the noise of panicking changelings tumbling on the ground, picking themselves up, and fleeing as quickly as their stubby legs allow.

1988 sighs.

“We’re never getting rid of the High Score the Shiny-bringer myth now, are we?”

“I can try to talk-”

“No,” 1988 shakes his head, “Just make sure they obey like they should. Telling them that you persuaded me to let 36658 live could give you some more gravitas. However, next time one of them mouths off to me or the warriors, we’re eating it.”

“Thank you...” 9999 lets out a breath of relief.

“Look,” 1988 leans down to 9999’s ear and whispers, “You’re not supposed to be in charge of anything, *drone*, but the same goes for me. I’m one of the

lowest ranked infiltrators in the hive. UNFORTUNATELY, it's actually possible that *we are the hive* now and that no one else is alive. We don't know why the queen left or where she is now, we don't know what happened to 156's group. We need to make sure no ponies or other threat wipes us out completely, and among those threats I count our own stupidity, understood?"

9999 nods.

"Good," 1988 continues, "Now, we're running dangerously low on love and the cocoons are at their limit. I need to be the one planning for the future, and the warriors are keeping an eye on things. This is a small camp, so I'm guessing that everyone knows everyone, which means we can't just replace a pony. I think we might have to, at least temporarily, rely on you drones for love."

"Whuh?" 9999 blinks.

"Interact with ponies and try to earn their affection. If I and the warriors figure out a way in which we can insert ourselves into the interpersonal dealings of the camp ponies and drain real love or lust, we'll work on a proper refill. For now, you need to help all of us at least sustain ourselves."

"Ok- okay," 9999 stutters. What is a drone being asked to do something that's clearly an infiltrator job supposed to do?

Seeing 9999 bite its lip nervously, 1988 offers a hint.

"There seems to be a lot of physical labor to do around here. Ponies might be grateful for some help, especially now that Uproot is still resting after the minor heart attack."

"Wow, that's a great idea!" 9999 blinks. This didn't even occur to it, "See? That's why *you're* the infiltrator."

1988 rolls his eyes.

"No plot kissing will save you if you don't get results."

“I meant it-”

Its statement is interrupted by 8622 stomping from around the corner right towards 1988 and whispering:

“The pegasus security guard just left the camp and is heading north. He could be carrying a message about the monsters but also about us. Even if this Stalliongrad might be a small city, they’re bound to have heard about Canterlot by now.”

It’s so much worse. Stalliongrad is the de-facto capital city of northern Equestria.

“We have to stop the message,” 1988 whispers back, “But we can’t do it close to the camp,” he grits his teeth and looks at 9999, “I’ve got an idea but I’m going to need you, 8622, with me. 9999, you’re in charge again until we come back. Tracking a flying guard at night is going to be a pain, especially if the monsters appear again, but we can’t afford him coming back with a newspaper or not coming back at all, and if he doesn’t show up to meet his contact, that’ll be even worse. Don’t mess up!”

“I-” before 9999 can even reply, the infiltrator and warrior duo are already sneaking north, keeping out of sight by hiding between the shipping containers.

“Nevermind, I’ll figure something out,” the drone sighs to itself.

Several minutes later, 9999 steps into the dim clearing on the south edge of the camp. Being greeted only by three pairs of eyes belonging to the sitting Silents would be disheartening to someone responsible for keeping 10 other drones whose whereabouts are unknown out of trouble, but 9999 knows its companions.

“Umm, guys,” it raises its voice, “No one’s getting eaten.”

One by one, 10 heads, each with a pair of glowing teal eyes, peek out from various places - a small grassy bank here, an overturned tree stump there,

two nervously looking down from a low-hanging tree branch covered in leaves, and more. They're all there.

"I mean it," 9999 adds, "Just no more mouthing off to higher ranks, okay? The fact that things don't seem exactly the same as they were back home doesn't mean that we don't have to listen to them. We're still alone and in danger, and we have to work together to avoid starving and pitchforks. And, due to some unexpected problems, the task of gathering love is on *us*."

A moment of buzzing, whispering of grass, and cracking of branches later, all 10 drones are sitting around 9999, all quiet, all eyes locked on it.

"So," 9999 tries to fill the silence, "I haven't exactly figured out how we do that yet but these ponies seem to be doing a lot of pulling logs and carts. We might be half their size but we can do that *easily*, so that could be a good way to start," it points at the Silents who return the gesture with their patented eternally patient and somewhat creepy empty stare, "You three are going to stay here and help 9013 with anything he might want. That, and make sure no one finds the cocoons- yes?" 9999 notices a raised hoof from 91887.

"Umm, if we gather some love, do we get to keep it?"

"You get to keep *some* of it. It's like back home but this time we're the infiltrators, which also means *that we get a ONE-TIME second chance if we mouth off to a high rank in front of ANOTHER high rank, isn't that right, 36658?*"

The bark-chewer in questions shuffles a little behind the drone next to it when met with 9999's fiery glare.

"So... no more of them having us race Badlands scorpions?" asks another one.

"Only if you want to."

"Can we trade love?"

“No,” 9999 shakes its head resolutely.

“But I found a button! It’s blue. It even has a bit of string still attached.”

“We will ration love in portions that make sure it lasts us as long as possible and that no one starves. No trading!”

“Awww, but I wanted that button!” replies a different drone, “And I found a wire thingy to trade for it!”

“You *can* trade things you find, just not love,” 9999 explains patiently. There are times where being accurate is critical, “Speaking of which, where did either of you find that stuff? That doesn’t seem like something that would just lie around in the forest.”

“Uhh, the button fell off of some cloth thingy one of the mares was dipping in water- hey, don’t look at me like that, I only took it after she left!”

“Return it,” says 9999.

“Whaaaaaat?”

“I said to return it. The pony in question might be grateful, and you could get some affection. If they don’t want it, you can keep it. ONLY if they don’t want it anymore. 54331, what about your wire whatever?”

“...I’ll go ask the ponies if they still want it...” grumbles the drone.

“Tomorrow,” adds 9999, “You’re all getting a good night’s sleep tonight. Silents will take the watches until 1988 gets back. First thing in the morning, you’re figuring out how to help the camp ponies in their lives,” it pauses for a moment and smirks to itself as an idea creeps to its mind, “And those who do best will get to spend time with the shiny.”

The drones exchange glances and gasp.

“I’d get resting if I were you then.”

9999 can't help smiling as the other drones rush off in a disorganized scuttle, each finding a hole, a nice patch of grass, or simply just another drone to sleep on.

In the morning, the only drone who didn't get much sleep is 9999 itself. It tried to calm down by telling itself that it's only for a while, that they're not in any immediate danger, and that it can make sure none of them get hurt or worse, but it didn't help. The thoughts of the others running off and getting eaten by the monsters, the ponies finding the slowly dissolving cocoons and recognizing other ponies inside, the possibility of 1988 not coming back at all... all that kept rushing through its head and preventing it from sleeping for long before the nightmares won again.

Bleary-eyed, it stops trying to get a proper rest when it hears the first signs of ponies waking up and walking around. A quick look around reveals that, despite the night worries, everything is as 9999 left it last night.

Quietly, it stands up, yawns, and starts shuffling towards the pony camp when the Silent currently on watch walks over and, without any visible change of expression, nuzzles 9999's neck. The drone blinks in surprise but smiles at the blank-faced Silent, pats its head, and resumes walking.

With nothing better to do, it sits down by the locked door of the main office building and waits, resisting the urge to slink away under the occasional stares of the ponies gathering for breakfast. Eventually, Hacksmith notices 9999 and walks over.

"Hi," the big earth pony greets it, "Are you waiting for something, uhh, which one are you? Sorry, you all look almost the same to me."

"It's me, 9999," replies the drone, "I wanted to ask Sawtooth if there's any way we could help but he's not in."

Hacksmith smiles.

"You'd be waiting for a while then. That lazy paper pusher gets to sleep in."

“Oh...” 9999’s ears droop.

“Buuut as far as helping goes, don’t worry about that. We don’t mind you just chilling around and doing your pilgrimage stuff. It’s not like you’re eating our supplies or anything,” Hacksmith shrugs.

“I- no, that’s not it. We, uhh, it’s kinda our... mission to be helpful and to work. 1988, 8622, and 9013 are busy and most of us drones have nothing much to do other than... pray, but-” clearly, 9999 is *not* a great spinner of lies, but an idea comes nonetheless, “our religion says that if we can help and work, we must. Is there *any* way we can help?”

“I don’t know, you’re kinda small and most of the things we do take some serious strength unless it’s the paperwork.”

“Oh, is that all?” 9999 tilts its head, “We drones can carry pretty heavy stuff. It’s what we do most of the time - dig and carry. Look!” 9999 scuttles under the surprised Hacksmith, “Lie down, don’t worry.”

“I’m not sure-”

“Please?”

“Oh fine, but I’m really heav-” he stops as, in the middle of lowering himself down, the drone simply stands up in all fours, lifts him with ease, and starts walking forward, “Oookay, that’s impressive, but I’m not letting you drag my legs on the ground,” he stands up again.

“See?”

“Alright, I’ll give you a shot. With Uproot still resting and everything that happened, my site is lagging behind a lot. I’ll down some breakfast and come pick you up.”

“Not me, I’ve got to keep an eye on things for now, but I’ve got 2 drones who can help.”

Hacksmith shrugs.

“If they won’t mess around and listen to what I say, it’s fine with me.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll do what they’re told.”

At noon, Hacksmith sits down, puts a box with today’s lunch on the stump of the freshly felled birch tree, and opens it. The delicious smell of steamed vegetables and rice wafts through the logging site, quickly drawing the attention of the two drones assigned to help him. It’s a little unsettling that, so far, he found no way to tell the two physically apart. Hay, if he tried to tell them apart from 9999, he’s sure he would fail. Still, from 9999’s description he thought the drone was overselling his helpers a bit but it turned out to be the exact opposite - they were much harder workers than that.

If only they weren’t so... weird.

“Do you guys... normally eat bark?” asks the earth pony.

“To understand the bark, one must become one with the bark,” says 36658, spitting out chewed up pieces of birch.

57999 nods vigorously. It clearly wants to say something but... you know... bark in its mouth.

“Yees, but why?” asks Hacksmith just to have some conversation during lunch.

“We can make goop out of it and it makes my fetlock hurt less- ow!” says 57999, finally managing to spit the chunk of wood in its mouth out and being rudely stopped by 36658 smacking the back of its head.

“What was that for?” asks Hacksmith.

“Nothing!” says 36658.

“Wait, did you get hurt? I doubt 9999 will be happy that I got you hurt or something,” Hacksmith stands up and reaches towards 57999 who shuffles

backwards.

“Please, don’t tell anyone I said anything about being hurt.”

Why do they look terrified all of a sudden?

“Alright,” he raises his hoof, “I solemnly promise I won’t tell anypony or any whatever-creature-you-are that you got hurt, but only if you tell me what the problem is, okay?”

The drones exchange glances and a few hushed whispers.

“...supposed to be helpful...”

“...he seems nice...”

“...it’s the pony who helped High Score save 1988...”

“Alright,” says 36658 warily, “I chew bark because it makes my belly hurt less. I used to eat it to make my headache go away but it made me sick so 387 punched me to make me throw up and told me to chew it instead. It helped but 387 was strong as a warrior and the punching made my belly hurt too...”

“Mind if I check you two out after lunch? I know my fair share of first aid, everypony in this line of business does.”

“Umm, okay?” agrees 36658 after a moment of hesitation.

Hacksmith finishes his meal. It’s not as if it’s healthy to do physical work right after eating, so he has the time to examine 36658.

“So, show me where it hurts.”

36658 taps its head right under its stubby horn.

“Hmm, I’m not seeing anything. Some scratches at worst,” replies the earth pony.

“Yeeeah, 387 said it was because I wasn’t really made to think but that it would eventually get better. A lot of us had this problem.”

“Yup!” 57999 nods.

“That... makes no sense,” Hacksmith shakes his head.

“You ponies probably got it different,” 36658 shrugs.

Hacksmith decides not to pry for now. Maybe he could ask 9999 or 1988 about it later.

“And the belly pain?” he asks instead.

36658 sits on its haunches and shows the underside of its barrel.

“This can’t be good...” Hacksmith’s jaw drops. The carapace is covered with a web of deep cracks filled with globs of green goo and broken off shards of the carapace, “Is that your... blood or something?” he carefully touches the smeared mess.

“No no,” 36658 shakes its head, “We drones usually just goop over wounds so that no mess can get in. I figured out that if I eat and dissolve some bark, sometimes the goop makes it hurt less. Dunno why...”

“It really does!” 57999 nods its head, turning around and showing Hacksmith its right hind leg, “Walking got so much easier once 36658 started helping me. I think it’s got something to do with the zebra trees.”

This one, though, makes Hacksmith gag.

The fetlock is partially twisted and broken so much it must be holding together *only* thanks to the goo. If a pony was hurt this bad, they would be screaming with every step, not patiently working on de-branching trees and pulling logs around since the morning.

“Guys, I can’t let you work like this-”

“What? Are we too slow? Did we mess something up?” 57999 gives him a completely confused look.

“We can do better!” adds 36658, “We’re just learning how you ponies do things.”

“No, none of that!” Hacksmith stops his hoof, “You’re badly hurt. If you keep working, it’ll only get worse. You’re going to sit down and rest for the day. You’ve helped me plenty already.”

“Nuh uh!” both drones pout as one, but 36658 is the one to talk, “9999 told us to help you ponies and that’s what we’re going to do. After all, 9999 let us rest all night for this, no watch schedule or anything!”

“Yeah!” 57999 joins in, “I had a dream about digging a new tunnel, it was full of shiny stones and there were no skulking chompers at all. It was *awesome!*” its sudden wide grin fades a little, “I think I might have kicked you in sleep, sorry.”

“Eh, no biggie,” 36658 waves it off before turning back to Hacksmith and stating, “We work.”

“Fine, I’ll find something easier for you to do- *no complaining!*” Hacksmith frowns at them opening their mouths.

They shut them... and simply wait.

“Speaking of which,” he speaks up after a while, as he’s resting with a drink, “I worked with a zebra shaman on the last gig. She used to brew potions specifically from birch bark which worked as a minor anesthesia and a muscle relaxant. We used to add them to our drinks in the evening to get a better sleep. I’ll ask our doctor if he can fix something up for you. Don’t worry, I won’t tell him everything.”

“Makes sense that a zebra would know everything about zebra trees,” 36658 nods wisely.

Hacksmith just rolls his eyes, the corner of his mouth curling up.

Hmmm... why are they so worried about anyone finding out?

It's evening.

Everyone is still alive.

9999 breathes out a sigh of relief as it looks over all the drones gathered in front of him, the Silents standing around the clearing, and sleeping 9013.

"So, how did it go today?"

"I returned the button! The mare was happy about it and gave me a hard paper thingy!" a drone waves its foreleg in the air, one of its holes containing a cardboard thread spool.

"Nice, you can keep it or trade it."

"Woohoo!"

Spurred by the success, other drones open their mouths.

"They told me it was broken and that I could keep it!" a drone waves the piece of a chain-link fence.

"Oh you lucky bastard!" gasps a drone next to it.

"We've got healing goop!" 36658 and 57999 exchange glances and wide smiles, "We even got a bag for bark because we did such a good job!" 36658 pats a small cloth pouch on a string around its neck, "Like real healing, much better than usual."

"Trade you for a wire thingy?"

"No," says 9999 firmly.

"But you said we only couldn't trade love-"

“I know,” 9999 lowers its voice, “but this is important.”

The drones’ eyes go wide as they all lean closer as one.

“Does that healing goop really work better than our normal one?”

“Uh huh! Hacksmith told us that zebra trees have anti-aesthetics properties. That means they make you relax and stuff hurts less.”

“36658, you have won an evening with the shiny,” says 9999 immediately.

“Yay!” 36658 and 57999 hoof bump as the other drones cheer quietly. The cheering gradually turns into a chorus of “I’ll get shiny next time, you’ll see!” or a disappointed “Awww...” from 57999 but there’s no malice in it.

“I didn’t say it was the only one,” says 9999 which makes everyone go quiet and hang on its every word again, “So, did anyone else manage to do something helpful or get love?”

“Heheheh!” 13415 grins and pulls a rolled piece of paper out of its leg hole, “I got a picture of the woorld!” it rolls the paper out for 9999 to examine, “I asked Sawtooth if he had something that says where we were and he had a whole book of these!”

“Hole-y...” It’s a map of northern Equestria. In a changeling fashion, it’s a perfect 1:1 copy in scale. 1988 will be ecstatic once he comes back, “Another shiny winner.”

“Heh heh heh,” chuckles 13415, “Liquid blue wibble light, here I come.”

“Anyone else?”

The other drones slowly exchange glances and shake their heads.

“Alright then. Since we’re starting slow, button and wire thingy here get to go as well. The rest of you go with 57999 who gets the shiny tomorrow. It’s not joining the other winners tonight because it will be taking care of all the wounds you show to it. Then you’re going to rest. I know I’m throwing around a lot of orders right now, but we don’t have love for any proper

healing, so every little bit helps. Tomorrow is a new day and a new chance for the shiny.”

All drones exchange narrow-eyed glances with the same and crystal-clear meaning:

“I’m going to come up with something so amazing that you scrubs can’t even comprehend and then the shiny time will be mine, ALL MINE! Well, mine and everyone who’s done a good job.”

However, they’re all still drones, which means they’re tight companions in a world that’s decidedly hostile and dangerous to them most of the time. That’s why the second message in their competitive glance is:

“I hope the goop thing works and you all feel a lot better tomorrow, shiny or not.”

Author's Notes:

Drones deserve all the hugs.

156, 387: 6

Author's Notes:

One more this week because I might have the time to write through Easter which, as you know, is a celebration of Jesus' bloody revenge on the chocolate bunny who led the romans to crucifying him and having to lie underground until he punched one-inch punched himself all the way up, found a katana, chopped the bunny into pieces, and ate it.

Gasping for breath, 156 looks up at the black form of Chrysalis reclining on the changeling throne and measuring the infiltrator, who's suddenly feeling *tiny*, with a frown.

She can sense the thousands of voices of the hive mind in the back of her head, many belonging to the pairs of glowing eyes in the dark holes dotting the walls of the throne room. Two dozen double-digits are standing at attention, lining her path to the throne under which stands "the merciless succubus" - rank 1 along with rank 5, both infiltrators watching her with an expression that expects incoming... amusement.

She knows she must approach even without anyone saying anything. Queen's will is permeating the air itself.

"I am *disappointed*," is all the queen needs to say for 1 to give her a bloodthirsty smirk.

That single short sentence has, in 156's eyes, enough quiet power to outclass any direct threat ever made. She hangs her head.

"I apologize, Your Majesty. I made a critical mistake in mapping the village contacts and my identity got compromised. It won't happen again."

Please.

Please...

Please!

“No, it will not,” says Chrysalis. 156 knows what it means and closes her eyes, “However, you might still be of some use.”

The infiltrator’s eyes shoot open again and her head snaps upwards to look at the queen. Is there a chance she could get out of this alive?

“Anything!” she nods eagerly.

“Heh,” Chrysalis chuckles, “I’m feeling rather bored today, so how about we engage in a little... contest.”

156 quickly looks from side to side, lowering herself into a fight or flight stance.

Hmmm... a battle for my life, possibly? It's not as if this is an uncommon situation. Double-digits everywhere, but if she chooses someone in the upper half of the top hundred, it's winnable. If it's a warrior, doubly so.

“I’m ready to fight for my chance, Your Majesty,” 156 nods.

“I have something much better suited for a *failed* infiltrator than a simple fight in mind. No, it will be a hunt of sorts.”

“I’m listening.”

“Of course you are,” Chrysalis rolls her eyes, “Now, I have no use for an infiltrator who can’t even drain love from a small, dirty hole like Appleloosa without being caught and nearly leading a guard patrol to the Badlands. However, some of the higher ranks are getting restless, and I feel like this could be an opportunity for them to stretch their muscles.”

156 glances at 1, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Chrysalis.

“Not her, don’t be silly,” says the queen with a laugh, “I want you to at least be able to leave the throne room. No, the fun part is going to be that you’re *not* going to know who is hunting you. It could be a group of high ranks, it could be a swarm of drones, it could be *anyone* but it won’t be *everyone*. Of course, if you *harm* a changeling who isn’t hunting you then I will have no choice but to consider you an enemy of the whole hive. Now you can look with barely contained fear at 1 here, because in that case you’ll be her meal, yes.”

“So I won’t know who is hunting me or how many of them there are and I also can’t just knock out everyone relevant standing in my way. Understood. How do I-” 156 is smart enough not to use ‘win’ in front of a painfully touchy queen, “-survive?”

“By leaving the hive and never coming back. Once you’re out of reach of the magic-blocking aura of the throne, you’re safe, at least from me.”

156 grits her teeth. It’s painful but she *did* hear rumors of stragglers who escaped the hive and survived even without the hive mind knowledge.

So... painful but not impossible.

“I... thank you for the opportunity, Your Majesty. You’re far more merciful than I deserve,” 156 bows.

“I am. You should be tossed into the crusher and every atom of your body transformed into love for your hive, but I do believe some practice for my chosen high ranks will be of value as well. You have a two minute head start. Get out of my sight.”

156 bolts out, accompanied by amused chuckles of the top ranks.

Okay, okay, okay, don’t panic. If she was telling the truth, which is a huge IF, there’s no time limit. Just enhancing my legs and getting to the edge of the Badlands crater in two minutes is out of the question. Maybe some of the warrior top ranks could do that but definitely not myself. While the topmost layer of the hive is fairly small, even if I get out, the rest of the

crater is a wide-open area and that's where at least some of them will be waiting.

You're an infiltrator, 156, not a panicking animal. Act like it.

She quickly copies the most recent map of the hive tunnels and suppresses her hive link as hard as she can. All voices inside her head go silent, but the walls of the hive still react to her touch and open a passage.

Passage deeper down.

“HOW DO DRONES *LIVE* HERE?!” screams 156, the green glow of her horn forming a blade which cuts a tentacle pulling her into a pool of green sludge in half. Before she can get the one wrapped around her other foreleg, it tugs with a sudden burst of strength and she dips her fetlock in the goo. Spikes of fire shoot through her whole leg immediately as the acidic liquid seeps into her hoof that's cracked and fractured from all previous encounters with monsters she had no idea existed.

Another flash of green frees her from the tentacle, she pushes herself backwards with her marginally healthier foreleg, and collapses on the floor, gasping for air through teeth gritted in agony.

“Damn it...” she just lies on the cold stone floor until she stops trembling from a combination of shock, exhaustion, and pain, “This whole place is a death trap.”

Okay, okay. Love reserves? Bad. Wounds? Not great, not terrible. Experience? More and more with each bleeding gash in my chitin. Good points? So far, no changelings. Good points other than “Not dead yet”?

...

There should be a crevasse leading almost all the way to the surface. I'm not a drone but I should still be able to dig my way up through two pony lengths of baked, rocky ground.

She takes her time as far as recovery without love is worth it before approaching the acid pond again. When no more tentacles appear, she jumps over with the help of her wings. She's wary of flying, having learned that things down here react to their buzzing far more aggressively than to simple hoofsteps. Why? Possibly they learned that flying drones can't dodge the rather common leech-like mouths breaking out of seemingly solid stone walls as easily compared to anything that can run.

She *did* learn. She did learn everything *they* had to learn to survive here for more than one shift.

With her surroundings lit only by the bioluminescent blue glow of her eyes, she proceeds further until...

She can't stop herself from tearing up.

The crevasse is there just like the hive map promised. No cave-in, no changelings. She's *so close* to freedom. Unfortunately, there's no realistic way she could climb it. The walls are coated with some kind of slime making using the natural hooks and jagged protrusions on her legs impossible. Growing claws or talons wouldn't be enough either. No matter what, she's going to have to fly.

"...like ripping off a bandaid, better to get it over with quickly..." she whispers to herself.

She spreads her wings... and freezes.

Why didn't she think of it before? She *did* encounter a cave filled with bats, after all.

With a shimmer of green fire, she transforms her wings into bat-like ones. It's a risk, because she isn't used to flying with them, and using pegasus ones without any air currents could be disastrous, but if the creatures here are using the high-frequency buzzing as a way to detect prey, the flapping of bat wings could throw at least some off her trail.

Of course, a bunch of stuff here is bound to be eating the bats too but the bats are small and she is big. That could help.

Gathering her wits and courage, she jumps into the air.

156 almost gets all the way up before the grinding of *something* on rock reaches her ears. She grabs the ledge the second a powerful tug shakes her whole body. Something is completely wrong but *she's up, she made it-*

Her vision swims as she quickly turns her head and realizes that half of her pelvis and one hind leg are missing, leaving only a fleshy, green mess protruding from her barrel.

“...wha...?”

Her body must have gone into such a strong shock that she can't feel it even now as she's looking at the horrific wound.

A worm-like creature, as thick as she is long from her horn to her tail, with many heads, each covered in glowing, yellow eyes and each sporting an acid-dripping mouth filled with rows and rows of teeth rises in complete silence. How? 156 doesn't know.

“...no...” whimpers the infiltrator.

She *almost* made it.

But ‘almost’ is just another meaning for failure.

Two heads shoot forward. She blasts one with a beam of green fire from her horn but the second one's mouth simply bites 156's entire remaining lower half off.

Despair washes over her. She knows she lost. She knows she's going to die so close to her goal. That knowledge, though, only makes her angry.

She turns her pain sensors off completely, gathers all her love, and as one of the heads reaches close for another bite, she lets out a blast of the brightest light she can conjure.

The creature lets out a series of sounds of someone choking on gravel which only grows stronger as 156 starts flailing with her sharp and jagged forelegs and feels all the eyes on the head above her get ripped open. The head retracts with 156 hanging by one foreleg stabbed into it and hacking everything she can reach into pieces with the other.

“...fucking DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!”

Of course, the satisfaction from the one final act of revenge doesn't last long as the adrenaline runs out and her vision quickly starts fading.

All of a sudden, a shockwave passes through... everything. She can't see it, it doesn't seem to have any effect on the dark tunnel, but it makes the hydra-worm-creature spasm with such strength that the fetlock hook 156 is hanging by breaks off and her body gets flung against the rocky wall near the ledge.

She has no idea what happened and she knows it doesn't really matter anymore. All she knows is that she at least left a wound the monster will remember for the rest of its crippled life.

That's when something grabs her foreleg, and pulls downwards... *into* the solid rock.

“...nnngh...” she can only grunt.

The numb feeling of dying all throughout her body suddenly vanishes with a shock similar to waking up from falling and hitting the ground, followed by her mental defenses shattering completely under an unknown blazing emerald hive link searing itself into her mind.

She flails her foreleg and whatever was holding her flies off.

“Ehhh-mmmhm?” hums a dizzy, familiar voice.

The source of the unique link invading her mind is right in front of her, so even without opening her eyes, she punches ahead.

Her hoof hits another one which doesn't budge and slowly forces her leg down.

"Come on, honey, fighting in front of the foal is bound to scar it for life."

156's eyes shoot open.

In front of her, surrounded by a green shimmer, is smirking 387. Next to him, 47989 is watching her warily with its head tilted after being tossed away by her.

"Are you real?!" she shoots out.

"Can't speak for the dummy here," replies 387, upon which 47989 sticks its tongue out at him, "but I'm the realest motherbugger you'll ever meet. Speaking of real- HURK!"

He can't finish the sentence as 156 pulls both him and 47989 into a chitin-crushing hug.

Eh, it can wait.

CH: 4/13 - Hiss

Chrysalis sighs.

Rotting in Manehattan for so long has been irritating beyond all reason. However, a huge city like that provides the best cover and plentiful opportunities for feeding, which her two warriors have been using on a daily basis. The problem, so far, has been time - the longer she lingers here, the lower the chance of her successfully recovering what little is left from the hive. Unfortunately, returning to the Badlands with the boiling fury in her mind beating against her mental defenses could, in the long term, be the final nail in the changeling coffin.

“Your Majesty,” asks 96, “May I ask something?”

She looks at him and nods.

“How long is this going to take? Don’t think of this as me questioning you, but *they* are somewhere out there. We left the Riverside survivors on their own... you’ve read the newspapers, right? We’re all over the place. Every day there is a fresh ‘Changelings found in X’ article... and they never end well.”

Her anger boils and lashes out.

“You will obey, and we will stay here for as long as it takes,” she snarls, “If we must start a new hive from scratch, we will!”

96 back off from the outburst.

“I understand,” he says.

Chrysalis would be a pretty bad infiltrator if she couldn’t detect the hint of disappointment in the warrior’s otherwise perfectly loyal voice which makes her regain control over her unruly brain.

“Look,” she says forcefully, “What you just heard wasn’t- was only partly myself. The rage, the complete disregard for anyone other than the queen, all that is a mess locked in the hive mind infecting us changelings. I *must* either eliminate it, contain or, or at least diminish it to some manageable level. Something happened during the invasion that made me finally see it clearly for the first time in my life and if I don’t use the opportunity then there won’t be *any* hive ever again. We will just keep attacking and hiding until we manage to anger everyone enough to go look for us together. Do you think dragons will care about the anti-magic field around the Badlands if ponies ask them for help and offer some of their extremely valuable artefacts?”

“My apologies, Your Majesty. I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” she frowns at him.

Truth be told, she’s more angry at herself than at him for not being able to resist the lingering insanity inside her head. However, as much as she wants to jump back in to tackle the next shade in line, she knows that an angry infiltrator is a bad infiltrator. As such, she takes a deep breath, looks at 96 again, and says:

“You’re a good warrior, 96, and your concern for your hive is admirable.”

The shock.

The shock in his face stings more than anything genuinely critical he could ever say.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Damn it.

Well, being sad is still preferable to being angry when diving into the depths of the mind. If nothing else, it serves as a grand reminder of what she’s fighting for. Granted, it’s far too many centuries too late, but better late than never.

The landscape of her hive mind isn't the usual empty darkness, though. Instead, she finds herself amidst hordes of changelings running through a forest, the thundering of hooves and cracking of branches almost deafening her. There are no ranks, no formations, and through the cracks in the treeline she can see the brown, dead landscape ahead - the Badlands.

This isn't an attack or a bait, it's a barely organized retreat.

Hmmm, if grandma Whisper was the one who organized the hive after the return to the Badlands, this could be the final retreat.

Maybe-

Instincts honed by centuries of fighting and surviving assassination attempts immediately save her when, from the corner of her eye, she spots a changeling *not* fleeing in the same direction as the horde.

She spins in a pirouette, hooking the leg of the warrior charging at her with her foreleg and using the swing to lead its attack into an head-first crash with an infiltrator trying to take her from the other side.

A hive link above her makes her aware of the next incoming attack which she resolves by a simple blast of energy from her horn cutting the changeling's head off mid-flight.

More and more break off of the fleeing army, swarming Chrysalis who recognizes this as the classic 'throw insignificant changelings at the enemy to tire them out' tactic.

"ENOUGH!" she yells, sparking a shockwave of green power from her horn knocking the changelings away and leaving only one standing.

One as tall as herself, watching her with a smirk. Infiltrator, certainly, yet possessing a manner of bulky carapace suited for someone used to war rather than cloak and dagger operations. Her bright, blue eyes contrast sharply with her black mane tied into a ponytail and, despite the difference between the ages of the two queens, she does look older than Chrysalis, or at least more *worn*.

To her surprise, the other queen doesn't order a new wave of changelings to attack, instead simply waving her foreleg around to encompass the entire situation. As she does so, the noise of the army fades away and the entire picture goes blurry.

"Chrysalis, Chrysalis..." the queen shakes her head, "Does this look familiar?"

Oh yes. When the bastards betrayed me during the first invasion of Canterlot. When my changelings started getting massacred from behind by the loyalists of my 'generals'. When Celestia saw it and ordered a counterattack by the forces she protected inside the castle itself. And finally, when we faced the fury of the alicorn of the Sun backed into the corner.

We made that huge mistake ourselves. We cocooned and gathered Canterlot citizens in one place so she didn't have to restrain herself anymore in fear of killing them.

Chrysalis shudders and rubs a particular spot on her carapace. Of course, with enough love there are no actual lasting wounds for changelings, but the memory of the blistering heat as Celestia flew out of the castle in front of her guards...

Some lessons never disappear, only fade.

This isn't that first defeat in Canterlot, though.

"Considering that with every queen's shade I get rid of I uncover even more stupidity, I'm fairly certain that this is a sight most of us grew to know."

"HAH!" the other queen laughs and the world disappears, leaving only the two of them in the darkness of the hive mind, "Correct. This, young one-"

"I am literally centuries older than any other queen in history..." Chrysalis rolls her eyes.

"Oh fine," the queen waves her hoof dismissively, "Chrysalis, I am queen Hiss, and that memory," she grins again as she resumes her previous

sentence, “Was our escape into the Badlands, the breakdown of the changeling territory, and the reason why we never should have had warrior queens in the first place.”

“You’re an infiltrator,” comments Chrysalis dryly.

“Oh har har,” Hiss rolls her eyes, “Of course I’m not talking about myself. I *saved* all those idiots running like hunted animals. Too bad all I got from that was a slit throat by my daughter Whisper whom I assume you’ve met already.”

“I did,” Chrysalis nods, still on edge and ready to answer any sudden attack. The problem with these dives into her own mind so far has been her love reserves serving to fuel both her and her ‘opponent’, which of course meant splitting her power in half.

Despite her calm tone, it’s impossible to hide how tense she is from another infiltrator queen, though.

“Geez, you look as if you had too much coffee,” Hiss snickers, “I have no desire to return to the world, especially since I know the shape you left the hive in.”

“Then why did you attack me?”

“*Moi?*” Hiss touches her chest with an innocent look, “Surely a queen like you can’t consider a small group of mid-ranks an *attack*.”

“Fine, let’s stop with the games. Every moment here is costing me the energy I need to save what little of our future is left. How do I make you disappear? And don’t try to bullshit me, I can easily just ram my hoof through your eye socket and would have done so if I didn’t have some questions first.”

“Now now, let’s not go full warrior on each other, that’s beneath us. If you want to learn, I have something to show you and to *teach* you. I know that accessing the hive knowledge is difficult due to the blood-red cloud of rage

hanging over everything but the least I can do is make my knowledge easier to sort through once I'm gone. We can get to what I want later."

"Alright, I'm listening."

"Funny, three words no queen would ever say to someone they would consider lesser."

"You *are* lesser. I've lived longer, I did way more with less than any other queen, and I'm fairly confident that my top ten would rip a bloody swath through all the other queens combined just because of being tempered in a lack of love so severe that all of you would starve," Chrysalis frowns, "You can't offer me more *power*, but you can grant me knowledge without me having to waste energy to obtain it."

Hiss scowls for a moment before saying:

"Fair enough."

A lack of reaction to a monologue like that rings *all* the warning bells inside Chrysalis' head.

"So, what did you want me to know and see?" she says despite her chitin crawling.

"The seeds of hatred and revenge Carapace and Bloodlust sowed," Hiss' horn flashes, and the darkness around them changes into what looks like a village.

Cocoons are hanging everywhere and amidst them... ponies. Ponies walking around, talking, and generally going about their lives. Chrysalis can sense the nervousness, unease, and shifty looks they occasionally give to the openly hanging cocoons but they are far from horror and despair which she's always associated with ponies learning about changeling long-term feeding habits.

"I only lived a short time in this place," Hiss looks around, "My mother will have to tell you more," she shakes her head, "Hole, I lived a short while

overall as you pointed out so eloquently. This was the grand experiment - ponies and changelings living together until a mass rebellion, clearly incited from the outside because the entire south of Equestria rose up as one, coupled with the united forces of the world straight up rolled over us.”

The clouds hanging above part and the skies darken with approaching shapes.

As changelings start gathering and looking upwards, ponies suddenly pull out anything sharp they can reach and begin to hack the cocoons with their friends open.

A pillar of fire bursts out in the distance as the first dragon descends on a changeling watchtower and incinerates it in a single breath. Changelings freeze only for a moment before the hive mind rings with orders from the east to the west.

Images of a massive zebra fleet on the horizon approaching the southern coastline. In the east, the griffon ships raise the Redtalon flag first and the flags of the other noble families of the, unlike ever before, united Griffon Empire. The griffons are already on the mainland, though. Strike forces of them, pegasi, and dragons, all covered by the cloud bank prepared earlier by the pegasi until it was time to strike.

Chrysalis’ jaw drops. Not even during the time of the Great Changeling Empire she and her mother built had the united forces of *the world* converged on the changelings. Granted, she was much more powerful and able to fight on more fronts instead of being locked down to one area easier to assault, but still...

“How...?” her jaw drops.

Seeing her wide-open eyes, Hiss laughs.

“*That* is the legacy of our warrior queens Carapace and Bloodlust, as I said. When you meet their shades, don’t bother talking to them, just stab them in any hole you can find until they die, will you?”

Slowly, Chrysalis nods. In front of her eyes, changeling ranks are being utterly obliterated, and she knows that through all southern Equestria, the situation is the same.

“Queens, queens, queens,” whispers Chrysalis, “Never tried a king, did you?”

“HAH!” Hiss laughs, “Who’s ever heard of a changeling king?”

“Indeed,” Chrysalis files that topic as closed which leaves her with only one more, “Anyway, there’s one more thing I want to know more about, and that’s Scream, the alicorn of Lust.”

With a flick of Hiss’ horn, the scenery changes again, and they both witness another version of Hiss standing on the roof of a massive black and green fortress, coordinating changelings in their efforts to fight off the united forces. With a deep “WHOMM!” a ballista nearby fires what’s basically a sharpened log, its tip laced with changeling acid, and takes down an approaching dragon in one shot.

This is the command center. Dozens of changelings specifically tasked as hive mind nodes are relaying a web of orders, something no queen could do on her own. Other changelings are working numerous ballistae or conjuring up magical barriers against the siege weapons used by the enemies.

Memory Hiss turns around as a blast of golden light in the center of the roof scatters the node changelings, crippling the changeling communications. A group of nine unicorns can be seen when the light fades, all wearing armors that even Chrysalis knows. White full-plate armors with golden ornaments and symbols of the sun - the paladins.

Changelings swarm the group but the strike force smites them down with ease.

With a scowl, memory Hiss grows blades on her forelegs along with conjuring a burning green blade out of thin air and joins the fray.

A somewhat jokingly small hammer surrounded by golden light breaks through her magical barrier and strikes her straight in the chest with the force of a meteor, sending the queen flying off of the roof and into the courtyard. As she stumbles back onto all fours, blood pouring from her mouth, two paladins appear in front of her, the one with the floating hammer and one seemingly unarmed, only wearing a solar talisman around his neck.

Whatever few changelings are able to help their queen immediately approach, but the unarmed paladin conjures up a magical dome around them, cutting memory Hiss off from any help.

To her surprise, the leading paladin takes off his helmet, revealing a scarred face of a brown pony with one eye missing. He is smaller than the queen, as common ponies compared to alicorns or queens are, but his telekinetic grasp wraps around Hiss' neck and squeezes so hard her armored carapace starts crumpling like paper.

"Who-?" is all Hiss can croak.

"My name is Grandmaster Holy Storm, you *pest*. Yes, that is exactly what you are - not a monster but a mere annoyance. We paladins face true mind-shattering darkness on a daily basis. However, in subjecting common ponies we are sworn to protect to your brainwashing, you and your species have gone far beyond salvation, and I'm here to show you personally that light *always* triumphs over darkness in the end."

Hiss' horn flares with all the remaining power she can gather and-

Crunch!

-everything stops.

She howls in pain, throat finally allowed to get some air as Holy Storm tosses her on the ground like a discarded toy. As she twists on the ground, he picks up her horn broken off by his levitating hammer, and rams it through her neck, turning her screaming into gurgles.

“How did you get out of this?” Chrysalis turns her head in amazement to shade Hiss standing by her side.

“Ask a stupid question...” Hiss rolls her eyes.

The golden barrier suddenly turns pitch black and lets through what looks like a common infiltrator. The unarmed paladin conjures two burning blades which flicker a brief moment later and hiss out in a puff of smoke.

“My my, what do we have here?” says the infiltrator in a voice dripping with amusement and honey, and shakes her head, “Two fanatics ganging up on a girl. Let’s reverse the roles a bit, shall we?”

Faint shimmer surrounds the second paladin before he gets flung out of the opaque dome with no resistance, leaving only crippled Hiss, Holy Storm, and the infiltrator inside. The paladin grandmaster doesn’t wait for anything, lobbing his hammer straight at the new changeling who simply... catches it.

“A dwarven artefact...” she examines the runes all over it and sighs, “Whose tomb did you vultures rob this time? Such a waste,” the head of the strange hammer begins melting.

Holy Storm’s horn lights up as he tries to rip it out of the changeling’s grasp. The moment he does so, though, he screams. Fractures appear all over his horn, light flowing through them like liquid, and then - boom!

To his credit, he takes the loss of his horn *way* better than Hiss, remaining standing and simply gasping for breath while watching the infiltrator with hate-filled eyes.

“Now, let me quote one very silly unicorn,” the changeling’s form burn away in golden fire, transforming black chitin into a much taller, golden coated, platinum-maned alicorn mare whose telekinesis rises Holy Storm by his neck to her eye level before *squeezing*.

“Grghh...”

“My name is Scream, you *pest*. Yes, that’s exactly what you are - not some kind of a holy warrior but a mere annoyance, Celestia's braindead lapdog. Do you like it?” the alicorn growls, “And I will scramble your head -by all means, *please*, resist as hard as you can, it will only hurt more- and afterwards, I will send your braindead body out with a simple mission - to kill Celestia. Of course you are going to fail but she will see yet another of her closest and long-lived companions reduced to a shambling mound she herself will have to put down,” even Hiss shivers from the venom dripping from the alicorn’s words, “She took *everything* from me in one go, but I *will* peel her entire life away from her like an onion - layer by layer. Her family was easy, her sister was even easier, her friends? I made her fear for anyone she could even remotely get close to. Instead, she chose her ponies over personal relationships, but there are so many of them, too many to protect, and I will get them, break them... one by one. Over and over and over and over.”

“Don’t... you dare... touch... my princ-” a flash of golden light, and everything that made Holy Storm himself is gone.

Scream lets the drooling unicorn drop on the ground. With a flick of her horn, Hiss finds herself overflowing with lust energy, enough to completely restore her body.

“Are you... are you going to help?” asks the queen, rubbing her previously pierced neck.

“Not directly. I can’t risk anyone seeing me,” she jabs Hiss’ chest, taking care to hit the exact painful spot where Holy Storm’s hammer hit her, “As far as everyone knows, *you* did this,” she nods to the motionless paladin, “Leave him here, he’ll do his job. You must gather everyone you can and escape, there’s no way you can win an open war against everyone. Great job on that, by the way.”

“Not my fault.”

“I don’t particularly care,” says Scream, “Go to the place that ponies call the Badlands and hide there. The remaining magical radiation is dangerous to living creatures in the long term but you changelings should be able to

adapt. We'll clean the place up later but for now you need a hideout where no one will follow you."

The memory fades into black.

"In retrospect, it *was* a stupid question," is all Chrysalis says.

"Told you," Hiss nods, "Anyway, I haven't talked to Scream since, because shortly after we built the basic layers of the hive, my daughter made herself queen."

"The usual way."

"Indeed. Love does enter through the jugular," Hiss laughs, "Anyway, I can feel you running dry thanks to the memories we went through, so I think I'll take my leave."

"One final thing, if you don't mind."

"Yes?"

"Other than myself and my mother, you and grand- Whisper didn't seem like the source of the hive mind rage. Do you have any idea where all the hatred for ponies is coming from?"

"Well, I doubt it's my mother. She was the one to change pony farming into somewhat forced coexistence. Possibly the warrior queens before her," Hiss shrugs.

"I see," Chrysalis nods, "Thank you."

"Hey, two more words no other queen ever said," Hiss laughs again and her body vanishes into the darkness, leaving behind the familiar fresh and calm feeling Chrysalis is growing more and more familiar with.

As she opens her eyes, she finds herself lying on the couch again.

She can barely raise her hoof due to exhaustion.

“96!” she croaks.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” the warrior who, in her current state, could easily end her if he wanted to trots over.

“Leave... me here... and go help... 68...”

“I can’t leave you unprotected-”

“...please...”

96 stops, bows, and says:

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

After the apartment door opens and closes, Chrysalis sighs.

“This... is only going... to get... worse, isn’t... it? The other... old hags... must be... *seething*...”

Author's Notes:

Holy moly this one turned out way longer than it was supposed to. Grimderp lore stuff.

I know, I know, not cuddles or fun again, but the next one should be 65536, although the horror is creeping to the little critter's arc too. But, as Holy Storm said - Light always triumphs over darkness in the end.

65536: 9

“-and... finally... add a... pow-de-red man-ti-core horn... to the coo-ling mix-too- mixture,” 65536 wipes its forehead and puts the book down, “That wasn’t so bad,” it stands up and its vision blurs, “Wowza... maybe I *did* overdo it a bit but Sharp said he’d show me how to make noodle bubbles as long as the underground mouth burrowers are,” it shudders at the memory of yet another horror living in the deep tunnels under the hive.

It hums to itself, unsure what to do next. Maybe it should go to bed early? Over the past two days, it’s gotten used to Luna’s rhythm of life and it knows it’s bound to have enough time to sleep through the day once Luna comes back from the dreamscape. Still, it’s almost morning, neither Luna nor Sharp have come to check on it since last evening, and 65536 has done everything it deemed necessary for tonight - some drawing, read a few pages from one of Luna’s books at random, and even taken a bath *completely on its own* and totally without slipping and bumping its nose this time! Even though it still filled the bath only a quarter full.

“Oh right, the cleaning stick must be dry now!” it walks over to the bathroom where it left a strange, long, rubbery stick mounted on a short metal pole with a button that made it buzz and go back and forth a little. It was an amazing find in a large box inside one of Luna’s numerous drawers filled with *many* things 65536 couldn’t identify and only knew they all had a lingering aura of lust around them. Being the clever drone it is, it immediately stripped a fuzzy cover off of a bar of soap, pulled it over the rubber part, and started cleaning its leg holes with it.

It tickled.

Once it hides the cleaning stick into Luna’s box of confusing stuff again, it stops and ponders its next move again. Princess Sunbutt hasn’t shown up to visit in the past two days either but 65536 hasn’t been using up much love at all and her previous visit topped the drone off completely which, in conjunction with Luna and Sharp, has kept it full so far.

It doesn't like one thing, though. Luna has been coming back battered and bruised, barely able to even talk to 65536 before collapsing on the bed and falling asleep. She sometimes kicked and screamed afterwards but always stopped when 65536 hopped into the bed as well and curled up under her wing.

65536 doesn't doubt it's going to happen again today and, with its tasks finished, it will be ready to administer its full range of cuddlery right from the start. Luna deserves a proper rest. Anyway, with nothing better to do and not wanting to miss Luna's return, it buzzes over to its cot in the corner, wraps its forelegs around Not-Blue, and simply waits. Drones are *great* at doing nothing when there's nothing left to do... which, admittedly, didn't happen often back in the hive. However, that just means that drones turned resting into a form of art.

Roughly an hour and a half later, the now familiar swirling black and blue portal appears in the air and Luna stumbles out of it, barely able to remain on all fours but with her eyes still darting around, scanning for threats.

"Luna!" 65536 darts towards her and catches her as she collapses forward. She's huge in comparison to a drone but still lighter than what drones carry on a regular basis, so 65536 easily at least keeps her in a sitting position. She sighs and wraps her wings around the changeling.

"You sure are a welcome sight, little one," she whispers, voice strained but relieved. Her horn flashes faintly in a way which 65536 knows means that Sharp Biscuit will be coming to check on her.

"I'm so happy you're back that my brain is making noises!" 65536 hugs her as far as it can reach, "Look! Do doo dododooo dum dum dudummm... dunno why."

"Finally, this is real," mumbles Luna, only wrapping her wings around the drone tighter.

And, as on cue, the door opens without knocking and the expected bat pony arrives, carrying a sheet of paper.

“Luna!” he puts the paper on a small table by the door and rushes to the princess, immediately checking her all over and touching the scorch marks, bruises, and cuts.

“I’m fine, Sharp, I’m fine...” lies the princess.

“I’ve seen plum puddings that were less black and blue than you,” says Sharp.

“That blue is all natural, I’d like you to know,” Luna forces a joke.

“That’s not funny! These three nights have been worse and worse-”

“Sharp!” Luna finally raises her voice, “*I know.*”

That gives him a pause.

“That bad?” he asks.

“*Expectedly* bad. The trauma from the invasion is too much. At first, it was just a few bad dreams, few rough awakenings, but as the shock is fading and the news are spreading over Equestria, the tantabus is worming its way into the consciousness of ponies and making things worse and worse even for those who haven’t seen a changeling in their life. I’m no longer able to stop it from spinning its nightmares so I’m doing my best to lessen the impact.”

“In that case, the news I’ve got can wait until-”

“Sharp, I knew what was going to happen. Every major catastrophe tends to follow the same fallout. This time, it’s simply worse than usual but nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

“Fine,” Sharp bites his lip, takes a deep breath, and says in a carefully measured tone, “I brought the guard report. A unicorn in lower Canterlot murdered his wife and two foals before killing himself in a bout of paranoia. He hasn’t been able to sleep since the invasion and thought his family was replaced by changelings. He locked them in a cellar and-”

A whimper not coming from Luna stops him. 65536 is staring at him, eyes wide, its mouth wobbling.

“We- we caused that...?” it breathes out.

Luna pulls the drone back into a hug.

“I’m sorry you had to hear about death in this way, little one.”

“Pfff, death,” 65536 gently but irresistibly pushes her away, “It’s not the death that got me, it’s... it’s the... it’s how unnecessary it was.”

“Unnecessary?” Luna raises an eyebrow at the drone’s choice of words.

“Yes,” 65536 nods, “Changelings died back home all the time, us drones mostly, but there was always a reason. Lack of love, being the first to survey a new digging site, accidentally slipping and luring a melty leg grabber... I could go on for a loooong time, but never someone just snapping. Even when high ranks played drone ball it served to bring some fun to almost everyone involved and if you were a good ball, you could even get a small helping of love or a shiny,” 65536 shakes its head, “Or maybe when a high rank wanted a snack, but even that was just to keep the stronger hive members healthy. No one just came in and started killing, especially killing the few lings they really liked unless it was a penalty for some huge failure and the queen didn’t want to send the ling to the crusher. This is just... sad,” 65536 hangs its head.

Luna and Sharp exchange suddenly *extremely* uncomfortable glances before Luna says:

“We knew this was going to get worse before it got better. We must power through it. As much as my sister would love to shoulder all burden for her ponies, that’s impossible. They must do their part as well.”

“That was the nicest way of saying ‘those weaklings have to step up’ I’ve ever heard,” comments Sharp.

“You know I didn’t mean it in a derogatory manner,” Luna frowns, “It’s simply the truth. We can’t do this alone, not without many *many* more unnecessary victims. Anyway, was that all, Sharp?”

“No, that was just the worst news. Luckily, the next thing I’ve got is better, although not by much.”

“I suppose that *anything* would be better than a dead family.”

“Yeeeeeah, let’s not celebrate too soon,” he sighs, “We’ve got several changelings in the dungeons. Nightguards are on patrol there to make sure nothing happens to them anymore. Didn’t you think it was weird that 65536 here survived the explosion so close to the source, crashed through your magically-enhanced door, ended only with a heavy concussion, and yet we haven’t had a single official report about survivors within the city limits?”

“I see...” Luna’s frown turns into a dark scowl as she immediately comprehends what the bat pony is trying to say, “Somepony has been taking ‘justice’ into their own hooves.”

“Yep,” Sharp nods, “and that somepony would be half of Canterlot citizenry including the Royal Guards, it seems.”

“Oh yes, the old ‘died of their wounds’ excuse so that they could get even,” Luna nods.

“Exactly. So, with Tender Feather’s help, we found several ex-hive changelings who managed to save some badly hurt hive changelings from the streets. Unfortunately, the love explosion stripped their disguises and did something to them that prevented them from reapplying those. The less lucky ones got noticed by their neighbors...”

“Like me,” 65536 taps its forehead. Sharp taps his hoof on the carpet in thought.

“Maybe, but probably not. They said the disruption lasted only for several hours. If I hazard a guess, I think you just hit your head too hard.”

“Heheh, yeah,” 65536 scratches a spot on its head, “It still stings.”

“Stop picking at it,” Luna gently pushes the drone’s hoof down, “It’ll get better sooner.”

“Okay!” 65536 puffs out its chest and mumbles, “...doesn’titchdoesn’titchdoesn’titch...” each repetition followed by a quick twitch of its foreleg, “Hah!” it suddenly looks at Sharp with the intensity of the sun.

“Umm, yes?” the bat pony tilts his head.

“I’ve got a ton of love! I can share with the other changelings. Sun-” it pauses, recalling that princess Sunbutt told it not to tell anyone, and harmlessly bends the truth a little, “No changeling deserves to die just because they didn’t have a choice in obeying the queen. You’re all really nice here and they’d be too if they knew you.”

“Spoken right after hearing about changelings being executed in the streets...” mutters Sharp to himself.

“*Here* here!” 65536 waves its foreleg.

“I know, I’m just messing with you,” Sharp gives it a soft smile, the first one since he arrived, “Just be careful. You got lucky you landed with Luna. Most of us in the Nightguard remember full well how it felt to be called a blood-sucking night monster before her return. I doubt the ‘prestigious’ Royal Guard members would give you the same opportunity to breathe that we did.”

“Indeed,” Luna frowns and shakes her head, “For the first months after my return, Royal Guards as well as the servants kept tensing up whenever I walked by. I couldn’t even count the amount of times I heard ‘traitor’ whispered my way,” she looks at Sharp, “Now, I’m going to have my hooves full in the dreamscape as usual but I don’t see a problem in you taking 65536 with you on your mission. If nothing, it should help persuade other changelings to cooperate. However, I doubt that a disguise consisting of crayon drawings and streamers mimicking my mane will be enough.”

“I’ll ask Grimmy if she has something inconspicuous and covering that her filly isn’t wearing anymore,” Sharp bows and turns to leave as he sees the sun rise up behind one set of curtains previously cracked open by 65536 who wanted to see the shiny blots occasionally flying through the night outside eventually identified as guards carrying lanterns or wearing glowing helmets, “Have a restful day, Luna. How about you, 65536?”

“I was awake all night! I did all my drawing and even reading. I don’t like writing that much, though...”

“Think of it as a very precise drawing. Or drawing a picture inside your head with words.”

“Huuuh...” the drone’s eyes go wide. A secret revealed!

With a snicker and a shake of his head, Sharp Biscuit leaves.

After nightfall, Sharp Biscuit leaves the castle via the servants’ entrance and heads across the open castle gardens towards the main gate separating the castle proper from the rest of upper Canterlot. The Nightguard on watch salutes him and says:

“They’re waiting outside.”

The portcullis is closed but the small, magically-operated, reinforced door next to it vibrates a little as Sharp approaches and, with a shimmer, a keyhole appears into which Sharp sticks a key from an already prepared keyring. He passes through and the Nightguard closes it behind him.

Three figures are already waiting outside as announced - a changeling-unicorn, a pegasus, and a bat pony.

“What’s that?” asks Blazing Light, nodding to a bundle on Sharp’s back.

“Shhh! Imma backpack,” 65536’s head rises up, revealing two glowing teal eyes under a dark green hood. As an explanation, it waves its forelegs

wrapped in rags and fastened with a knot going through a leg hole before clamping them again around Sharp's sides.

The bat pony mare next to Blazing squee's, darts forward, and starts poking the bundled-up 65536.

"That's *adorable!*" she beams.

"Stop that, Darky," Sharp rolls his eyes and backs off.

"Can I get one too?" she gives him puppy eyes, "Pleeeeeease!"

"Don't you already have somepony who needs your full attention?" he nods towards Blazing, who frowns and looks away.

"Not anymore, he's finished his potty training and we're moving on to simple commands next week."

"I can fetch!" replies 65536 with excitement, "And back in the hive, I was all about simple commands."

"See?" Darky glances Blazing's way, "He's already outperforming mister doom and gloom here."

"It," Sharp corrects her, "As far as I know, 65536 is genderless."

"Really? Let me--"

"How about you *don't* molest one of the few friendly changelings we've met so far," says Blazing dryly, "Or have you literally run out of ponies in Canterlot?"

"Says mister 'halfway to thirty and never gotten dirty'," she sticks her tongue out at him in response.

"Thanks for the reminder. I'll just take that short set of stairs leading to the city walls and proceed to jump down. Who wants to see me do a flip?"

“I’m not explaining to the recruits why their favorite drill sergeant is now tenth of a hoof tall and covers the entire lower third of the mountain, so we’ll have to postpone. How does Saturday sound?”

“Deal, bring a camera and a laugh track,” Blazing shrugs, “Now, if we’re done screwing around...” he rolls his eyes.

“Oh thank Luna,” Sharp breathes a sigh of relief.

As they start walking through upper Canterlot itself, Tender Feather shuffles closer to Sharp and asks:

“Is this... normal for you? I can sense emotions and that unicorn-”

“Is a very difficult pony to be friends with,” Sharp finishes with a smirk and a glance at Blazing walking in front of him, “And yet...”

“I can sense emotions and I work in a brothel that serves both genders,” she looks meaningfully at Sharp, “*I know that look.*”

“Heh,” the bat pony chuckles quietly, “It’s not that simple. Let’s drop that topic, shall we?”

“Your call,” Tender shrugs, “I’d just like to say that we *do* get a surprisingly high amount of customers who spend most of their time with us... just talking.”

“What’s a brothel for anyway?” asks 65536, “Is it for brothers who can’t spell properly?”

“How to explain-” starts Sharp.

“Lust gathering place, sometimes even love,” says Tender simply.

“Ohhhh! Gotcha,” 65536 nods.

“Huh,” Sharp blinks in surprise at how easily the situation was explained, which makes Tender Feather smirk.

“During the interrogation, you asked a lot about myself and changelings in general,” she says, “but there’s too much intricacy to cover in one sitting. The drone here, 65536, isn’t a foal, at least not in a way you think of them. Besides, do you think *a changeling* wouldn’t know about sex?”

“Well, I...” Sharp sighs, “I must admit I put a little too much stock in appearances in this case.”

“Appearances... regarding a changeling.”

“Blazing might be getting some company on those Canterlot walls next Saturday, eh.”

“Hah!” Tender Feather laughs openly, “Don’t feel bad, it’s not like 65536 was deceiving you or anything. I’ve been away from the hive to realize how different the conditions even for the least fortunate of you ponies are in comparison to the life back ho- in the hive. You were right, drones are genderless. They don’t need to have any sexual characteristics, their genetic material isn’t of any value to the hive and their work is... I don’t think you can even begin to understand that calling it dangerous just isn’t enough. It’s *lethal*. Drones die, it’s only a matter of time. The fortunate ones can sometimes manage to live up to a year-”

“A YEAR?!”

Both Darky and Blazing turn their heads at the outburst. Only Darky has seen Sharp genuinely angry before but never like this.

Sharp’s voice is carefully controlled but still trembling when he asks:

“How old are you, 65536?”

The “backpack” reveals its head again.

“24 days, 11 hours, and 34- no, 35 minutes. Neat, eh? I’ve almost made it to a whole month,” it smiles proudly.

Sharp’s jaw drops. He continues walking, staring blankly ahead in horror.

“Are you okay?” 65536 nuzzles the back of his neck carefully.

“Doesn’t it bother-”

“Mister Biscuit,” Tender Feather interrupts his question, “I told you, we are different in ways which would take too long to encompass in their entirety. One of those would be an excellent internal clock. You see, your foals learn over time and mature. Changelings get knowledge sort of... *forced* into them right after they hatch. Everything we need to know is inside the hive mind and you can only access what you’re supposed to. 65536 is a fully mature changeling drone but in terms of world experiences outside of the hive, it is less than a foal. And yet, treating it like one would only *make* it act like one. As far as danger and death goes, I’d safely bet that 65536 has faced more than both of us put together.”

“But colors... crayons... bubbles...”

“Are all new and frankly *amazing* things. Hole, *I* used to spend whole nights just walking around Canterlot whenever I had the energy to spare. I still do, sometimes. The light of the firefly lamps reflecting off of the gold foiled, *white* marble buildings. Magical explosions from the Orders of Wizardry or the School for Gifted Unicorns. Everything here still *is* amazing to me. The hive is dark and mossy green. Tunnels underneath are black or brown unless someone happens to find a seam of materials or gems which get immediately confiscated to allow infiltrators a new approach to missions. If it’s of any value, drones aren’t allowed to have it. They have no need for it.”

“That’s not true!” 65536 objects, “9999 once bit off the end of a dead Bannngh... we said we wouldn’t say where the hive is, did we?”

“Mhm,” Tender Feather nods.

“Well, 9999 once bit off a poisoned stinger off of a dead scorpion and saved 24498 from a sizzling chitin cruncher. They let it keep the stinger and it was super valuable. That drone is going to go places one day. I hope it’s okay.”

“...how do I explain this to Luna...?” Sharp shakes his head.

“Do you have to? Does the past really matter *that* much?” asks Tender Feather, “65536, how do you like it here? Use your own words.”

The drone finds this intriguing enough to sit upright for the first time and furrow its brows in thought for a moment.

A moment that grows longer and longer until...

...65536 beams and spreads its forelegs as far as they go.

“GABLONK!” it exclaims loudly.

“W-What?” asks Sharp.

“Tendy said to use my own words, which was smart because I couldn’t think of a word you ponies use that’s enough, so I made one up - gablonk! It means *so much that even ponies who live here have no word for it.*”

Tender Feather covers her mouth with a hoof and says:

“There you have your answer, mister Biscuit. I doubt it’s *the* answer you were looking for but it’s an answer. Gablonk.”

Sharp Biscuit sighs.

“Gablonk it is then...”

Author's Notes:

This entire mission was supposed to be in one chapter but I just keep filling it with banter.

****ominous trailer music****

Bed bugs, bed bugs,

whatcha gonna do, whathcha gonna do when the come hug you?

Bed bugs, bed bugs.

****music stops****

Next week on They're Everywhere!:

Beer, bugs, monsters.

Familiar paladins.

Bleeding of nightmarish monsters into reality.

So yeah, the "comedy" this was supposed to be.

65536: 10

“...hate heights, hate flying, hate everything, hate hate hate hate hate...”

Blazing Light keeps whispering as the group nears the streets of lower Canterlot after flying down the side of the mountain from the upper city. So far, the only one surprised by it is Tender Feather. 65536 doesn't even notice, being too busy turning its head around and chittering with excitement ever since they left the castle. Thankfully, the dimly lit night has provided enough cover so that nopony noticed that the quadruped riding on Sharp Biscuit's back is a changeling wrapped in layers of clothing not exactly fitting the late summer night.

“Oh shush, you big colt,” says Darky, gently setting the unicorn cursed to be something changeling-like down, “You're fine.”

“My leeeegs...” Blazing stumbles, trying to regain control of his wobbly and weak limbs.

“Seriously, the *worst* case of vertigo and fear of heights I've ever seen in my life.”

Blazing grumbles something incoherent to himself before looking back at Tender Feather.

“How far away is the tavern?” he asks.

“We landed a little further away than I expected but we're still in the mountainside quarter. We'll be there in ten minutes, give or take,” says Tender and starts leading the group through the streets of lower Canterlot.

“We *would* have landed in the right place if *certain somepony* didn't keep praying to anything from Celestia to Bar-Gakh the Flesh Twister to be on the ground as soon as possible. If ya- you wanted quick, I could have just dropped ya- *you*, damn it!”

“Isn’t Bar-Gakh the OnO god for lawful evil clerics?” asks Sharp, receiving questioning glances from everypony, “What? Dusk Gloom, Grimmy, her foal, I, and a few others have sessions every Thursday. Hay, Shining Armor used to run a minotaur barbarian with us until the preparations for the wedding started. We invited Luna once shortly after her return but, as it turned out, having somepony who can actually cast epic-level magic is not as much fun as one would think. Poor Cloud Shadow hasn’t been the same after getting sent into a different dimension for five minutes via a Maze spell. Come to think of it, inviting a changeling who could transform into monsters would do wonders for the ambiance.”

“Memememememe!” 65536 starts bouncing up and down on Sharp’s back.

“You can’t transform.”

“Memememememe when I get better!”

“I’ll think about it,” Sharp can’t help cracking a smile, “Now, everypony, focus. We have a job to do.”

They reach the sought tavern soon. Despite it being so close to midnight, there are still twenty or so ponies sitting alone or in small groups and chatting. The ground floor is a wide open, long, rectangular room with the occasional wooden pillar for support, on the opposite side of which is the counter. The earth pony bartender’s eyes flick towards the incoming group and the rug with which he’s been cleaning a tall glass freezes for a moment. To somepony who knows exactly what they’re looking for, that’s enough of a giveaway.

Sharp Biscuit and Tender Feather approach him first while Darky and Blazing scan the area for any potential trouble or anypony listening. Fortunately, after the initial surprise of seeing two Nightguard and one Royal Guard armors in this part of the city the interest of the patrons seems to have dissipated rather quickly.

“How can I be of assistance to the crown this fine evening?” asks the bartender in a friendly manner, “Or is your visit here simply for pleasure.”

“Unfortunately, business only,” says Sharp, nodding towards the numerous bandaged spots all over the bartender’s coat, “Speaking of which, those look rather serious.”

“Huh?” the bartender looks at his wounds as if seeing them for the first time, “It looks a lot worse than it really is. I got spooked during the attack, tripped, and fell down the stairs.”

“Must be some serious friction on those stairs to cause *burn marks*,” comments Sharp.

The bartender gives him a withering look.

“I store alcohol, lantern oil, and cooking fat there. Must have struck a few sparks as I tumbled and hit a barrel. From what I heard, quite a few fires happened during the attack.”

“Mister Biscuit, let’s not go full police, alright?” Tender Feather puts a hoof on the counter, leans closer, and quickly transforms her pegasus fetlock into a changeling one and back. As the bartender gasps, she adds in a quieter voice, “I’m Tender Feather. A mutual friend told me they helped you get the survivors off the streets before the Royal Guards could get to them. Where are they?”

The innkeeper sighs, reaches behind himself for a wooden sign reading “Be right back”, puts it on the counter, and nods towards a hallway leading to the back.

“Let’s not talk here in the open,” he says.

They all follow him down into the cellar filled with supplies like in any other normal establishment. However, the next cellar behind a much sturdier door presenting itself as a storage for the more expensive kinds of wine contains eleven changelings, nine barely moving or breathing, their carapaces broken and battered, one who’s able to sit up and look at the entering group, and one in a somewhat reasonable shape cleaning the worst of the cracks in each victim’s carapace with a sponge.

Whoever can at least turn their heads do so. No one curses, no one reacts in any other way, no one has any energy left to resist. It's clear that they knew they were on borrowed time and now they assume it's run out.

"I've been feeding them whatever scraps of energy I could get but being an innkeeper isn't exactly a love mine. By the way, my name is Tankard," says the bartender.

"65536, have a look around, will you?" says Sharp.

As if waiting only for the permission, the drone hops off of him and begins running around between the changelings in a seemingly random pattern before stopping by the side of one and shaking its head.

"Sharp, Tendy, this one is gone."

"Damn," Tankard walks over, "I was suspicious it wouldn't make it through the day. Tender Feather, can you and 65536 take care of it?"

"We can get the body out of here if needed," says Sharp.

Tankard shakes his head.

"That won't be necessary. We changelings do things... differently."

The four of them watch as 65536 and Tender Feather begin covering the dead changeling with green goo which, over the course of only a few minutes, dissolves it in its entirety, leaving behind only a barely visible cloud of green mist which dissipates shortly after. Tender returns to the group while 65536 resumes running around.

"What was that about?" asks Sharp, stunned by what just transpired.

"Changelings don't exactly go for funerals," says Tender, "When we die, the others dissolve the body and absorb the love that's coursing through us. Our enzymes can do pretty weird things sometimes, I doubt even the queen knows all the bloodlines and combinations we can be born with even without using shapeshifting, but the body-dissolving one is a constant. I

haven't done it in ages so I let 65536 do most of it on instinct and it's now feeding the love to others."

"It's like being a high rank!" exclaims 65536, "You get a nom! And you get a nom! And you get two noms because you look really bad!" it keeps rushing from one changeling to another.

"So, what happens now?" asks Tankard, "As I said, the best I can do on my own is prolong their pain and hope some of them get better naturally."

"We'll have to move the worst cases to the castle dungeons where they'll be in 65536's reach," says Sharp after some thought, "I wouldn't grab everyone, though. Too risky. I'll ask a few Nightguards to come and take the ones you identify as those with the least chance of survival to the castle. And for the love of the moon, if a Royal Guard turns up here," he looks at Blazing, "other than that guy, you haven't seen a changeling in your life before the invasion."

"Trust me, that's been the plan even with you."

"Good. 65536, how's it coming along?"

The drone stops, says-

"Almost done- whoah!"

-and keels forward right on its muzzle.

Sharp *jumps* forward and picks the dizzily blinking drone up.

"What's going on?" he looks back at the two other changelings and then back at 65536, "Are you okay? Exhausted? Do we need to go back?"

Tender Feather and Tankard exchange glances, same goes for Darky and Blazing who smirk at each other.

"'m fine..." mumbles 65536, "Nt ev'n hunrgy.."

“It doesn’t seem drained,” says Tender Feather, “I’m guessing that, as a drone, it’s never really had the responsibility to feed a cluster of changelings so it overdid it for its first try. Give it a few minutes and it’ll be back up and bouncing around again.”

“Still, it did help a bunch,” Tankard is now walking around and checking the sleeping changelings, “Asleep is a clear step up from unconscious.”

“Alright, I think we’ve done enough for tonight,” Sharp stands up and puts 65536 on his back, “Let’s head back.”

Once they all return to the main room of the tavern, they can’t help noticing it being strangely quiet and cold. Other than that, though, the patrons are focused only on their drinks, not paying any attention to the group anymore.

As they’re about halfway through the room, escorted by Tankard, Blazing turns his head backwards and catches the eyes of one earth pony patron staring straight at them.

No, not eyes.

Empty black holes

“What the-” Blazing furrows his brows.

The patron opens his mouth and points at him.

“SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

The ear-splitting unnatural screech is a signal for every single other pony in the tavern to look up, their faces empty, dark grimaces of horror. One by one, they point at the group, screeching and rising up while knocking over their chairs.

Like a small horde of zombies, they charge ahead with unnaturally quick, twitchy motions, those closest to the door leading outside blocking the escape route.

“W-What’s going on?” Tankard stumbles backwards, eyes wide open.

“Citizens, by the orders of the Nightguard, stay back!” Darky raises her voice.

Sharp is quiet, taking a step back and making sure 65536 is still on his back. The drone is tightly clutching his barrel but he can feel it turning its head from side to side.

Blazing is the first one to act, pouncing at the nearest *pony* and getting him with a mean right hook. The pony only stumbles backwards and immediately charges at Blazing, empty black mouth gnashing and snarling.

One of Blazing’s two swords positions itself between them, aiming at the pony who rams into it with reckless abandon, causing it to harmlessly slide aside.

The entire exchange takes about two seconds, which is all Blazing needs to call out:

“Invulnerable?!” his shock turns into a smirk, “Alright,” Blazing uppercuts the charging pony so hard he makes a backflip and lands on his back.

Sharp finally realizes what’s going on and whispers:

“Luna...”

“What?” Darky hears him but can’t demand any explanation as she has to defend herself from a two ponies flailing their forelegs at her.

“It’s got something to do with the dreamscape! If they’re in the real world like this, Luna must be in trouble,” yells Sharp, stunning two ponies attacking him with quick jabs and then kicking them away, “Back off, back off and regroup! Tender, Tankard, you first.”

The only reason they’re not overwhelmed yet is that the strange ponies are massing between them and the door leading outside, pushing them back to the bar counter.

“Luna is in trouble?!” 65536 on Sharp’s back gasps, “No! Bad guys! *Bad guys!*” it swipes its hoof against a mouth trying to bite Sharp’s side. It has

no teeth so who knows what it would do if it hit, but with the drone's strike connecting, it's quickly crystal clear that it won't get a second chance.

The chomping muzzle wibbles when struck and the drone's hoof shimmers green, cleaving through it as easily as if it was jello.

The pony screeches, though this time it's muffled and distorted due to the mangled jaw, and stumbles backwards. Sharp uses the moment of surprise from the others to kick the nears one back and cover the slow retreat.

"Back off to the cellar!" calls out Tankard, "We can barricade the doors there."

"We need to last until Celestia raises the sun and ponies start waking up!" says Sharp.

They reach the cellar door.

It doesn't open. Blazing hacks at it with his sword and feels it *slide* over it just like it did when hitting the attacking pony.

The stumbling and stomping from upstairs makes them realize their mistake in not trying to break out immediately. The patrons downstairs were only a fraction of ponies inside the tavern. The others were sleeping in the rooms on the upper floors.

The others who now pour like a screeching wave down through the narrow staircase, stumbling over each other.

"65536, BREAK THE DOOR!" orders Sharp and feels the drone turn on his back and jump on Tender and then Tankard who is still trying to force the cellar door open.

65536 is breathing quickly, its heart beating like a jackhammer, but it forces itself not to look back when it hears Sharp grunt and hears the smacking of hooves against flesh and armor.

It swings, its digging instinct taking over and automatically transforming its hoof for the best digging efficiency at the moment of impact. A groove is

left behind but the door is thick.

Next swing is enough to get the small hoof through. Like a dog paddling water, 65536 begins breaking the cellar door.

“Oh buck-”

“Darky!”

The bat pony mare disappears under the mass of ponies.

“I almost got it-” reports 65536, trying to dig as quickly as it can.

“Don’t worry about us, just keep go- oof!” Sharp has to back off after a punch in the throat directly above his breastplate.

“DIE. IN. A. DITCH!” screams Blazing furiously, now more shoving the attacking ponies away in an attempt to get to Darky lying on her back, trying in vain to push the mass off of herself with all four legs.

“GOT IT!” 65536 has finally managed to make a big enough hole for itself to go through, “Just a few seconds more so that you can fit in too,” it says, digging like crazy, each swing gouging out a good chunk of wood reinforced with cast iron.

“GO IN! LEAVE US! WARN THE OTHER CHANGELINGS DOWNSTAIRS! THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO HURT THEM TOO!” orders Sharp.

“Wha-” 65536 turns its head. On one hole, it’s an order. On the other, it’s a *really bad* order.

“GO!” screams Sharp again, disappearing under a coordinated charge of several ponies.

“No!” 65536 scowls, jumps at the pile covering him, and starts “digging” the ponies, chunks flying from under its flashing hooves.

Something grabs its hind leg. I can barely turn its head before an irresistible pull on it flings it across the entire room towards the exit.

It shakes its head. The good part is that it's now away from the pile of ponies completely covering the rest of the group. It can't just leave them, though. Something supposedly happened to Luna and all its friends are here, overwhelmed. Sharp meant well, but 65536 has nowhere to run.

It charges back towards the pile of ponies punching and biting down.

"I'm not leaving you!" it yells.

It makes it about 3 steps forward before its entire body seizes up, enveloped by a golden glow. Struggling does nothing, and all it can do is turn its head.

Two unicorns are standing by the open door, one in the lead - older, scarred, grey, with greying brown beard and mane, and one much younger and far more typical blond and white, his flying sword hovering next to him. Both are wearing full plate armors gilded with gold and bearing multiple sun symbols.

"Vanish back into darkness, monsters!" calls out the seemingly unarmed leading unicorn in a booming voice. The solar talisman around his neck flashes in tune with his horn, and a slow shockwave, like morning sun making its way across the landscape, passes through the tavern. Wherever it touches the nightmarish ponies, they immediately sizzle away and reappear as patrons in their original places. Turned over tables and chairs return to their original positions, normal sounds return to the building, and the persistent gurgling and screeching fades completely, leaving only the beaten and bruised group groaning on the floor by the broken cellar door.

As the tavern patrons start shaking their heads and looking around, clearly knowing that something happened but having no idea what, the glow around 65536 pulls its hood over its head again. Without much care, the leading unicorn's telekinesis tosses 65536 to the other one and advances towards the recovering group of guards and two disguised changelings.

“Get up,” says the unicorn coldly, “All of you, go outside. Now,” he adds in a tone full of authority.

Sharp wants to object but notices the second paladin holding 65536 already leaving the tavern.

“Oh buck...” he whispers. Knowing who the unicorn is thanks to his rank, he’d much rather take his chances with the possessed ponies again. With a grunt of pain, he pushes himself up and rushes towards the door, not waiting for the others.

The mountainside quarter of lower Canterlot is full of dark, dead-end alleys, and one of those is right next to Tankard’s tavern, barely lit by the dim, yellow glow coming through its upper floor windows. Out of sight of any casual observer, the second paladin removes the hood from 65536 and starts examining it. Seeing that, Sharp advances on him and gets blocked by the leader.

“While we are grateful for your intervention, Grandmaster Beacon, you are interfering with official Nightguard business,” says Sharp in the most official tone he can muster, glaring at the leading paladin, “As the head of the Nightguard, I order you to release the changeling.”

The paladin narrows his eyes and taps the solar pendant hanging around his neck.

“My business precedes yours, Sharp Biscuit,” says the paladin and, to the displeasure of everyone now catching up, levitates 65536 to himself, grabs its chin, and turns its head from side to side. 65536 smiles at him, believing that while it might not make things better, it *can’t* make them worse, “Hmph,” he gives the changeling back to Bright Star.

“And is your business torturing and executing prisoners of war?” Sharp doesn’t back off, scowling at him.

“Our business is purging darkness from these lands, bat.”

“Really?” Tankard takes a step forward, “Because it sure as ho- hay didn’t look like that after the invasion. Ponies in Royal Guard armors and even ponies like you kept running around, snapping the necks of surviving changelings or breaking their carapaces with blunt instruments to make it look like they died on impact from the explosion. Your ‘darkness’ disappeared when the queen and her top ranks were cast out.”

The paladin scowls.

“You should be grateful you’re not sitting in prison, awaiting your judgement for high treason, *changelings*,” he glances backwards at the other paladin, “Bright Star, escort them back to the castle. The innkeeper can stay here. I can sense more incursions like this one going on. I can’t tell why-”

“Something must have happened to Luna in the dreamscape,” Sharp interrupts him, “Ponies are terrified after the invasion and the creatures in there are using the fear to get into the real world.”

“Hmph,” frowns the paladin, “Ff that’s the case, fighting the symptoms is the best we can do without preparation,” he looks over everyone, “You have your orders.”

He vanishes in a flash of golden light.

“...I hate that arrogant-” Sharp breathes out to himself.

“A-hem,” Bright Star clears his throat, levitating 65536 towards Sharp, “We might not see eye-to-eye, but I can assure you that Grandmaster Beacon wouldn’t stoop so low as to order a purge of any defenseless survivors.”

“How long have you known him?” asks Sharp, grabbing 65536 and setting it on his back, “Because as far as you fanatics go-”

“I’ve served under Beacon for over a century,” Bright Star, looking barely over forty, gives Sharp an amused look, “I know him. Still, I must admit that there are members of our order who take the term ‘darkness’ rather broadly and aren’t too appreciative of nuance. Now follow me. The sooner

we get to the castle the better. I doubt these incursions are random and I'm not willing to risk you getting dragged into another one."

"Umm, how about us?" asks Tankard, looking at Tender Feather.

"You, innkeeper, can stay here. My orders regarding the rest of you were clear. You're going to the castle with me. What you do afterwards is your call. This isn't a situation with which I'm familiar, so I'm sticking to the orders of somepony with way more experience."

The sun rises.

For the first time since 65536 has been on the surface, it does so without Luna first lowering the moon.

65536's lower lip wiggles. It didn't get any sleep but that's secondary.

The secret teleportation mirror in Luna's bedroom shifts, letting in Celestia who looks around, her eyes stopping on the changeling.

65536 looks up at her, snuffles, and buzzes over to her with forelegs spread and eyes wet.

"Luna hasn't come baaaack!" it cries.

Celestia hugs the little creature with a sigh, patting its head with a wing.

"Beacon told me what happened last night. We must be patient."

"Can't we help? I could hurt those things when the others couldn't. We must do something!"

"We can't, little one," Celestia shakes her head, "Dreamscape is Luna's domain. I can't even get there without her help, and with our lack of experience we'd be more of a burden. We have to believe in her. It was similar after her return and after Discord's escape, but she's always pulled through."

“But-”

“Believe in her, 65536. I know I do.”

Author's Notes:

No fun allowed this time.

156, 387: 7

Author's Notes:

Ayyy, another chapter that didn't move anything forward.

Anyway, I got some helpful eye drops which made watching the screen for an extended period of time possible. I can still feel something like scratching in my eye but it's getting better.

“Use your knowledge! We’ve been through this before. That way!” orders 559 and points towards a manhole in the middle of the street ahead. Being the highest-ranked changeling present, the small group of two other warriors and one infiltrator obey without question.

Last thing they all recall before appearing here is them fighting off hordes of worm-puking, invulnerable equines, then some weird, mantis-like creatures appeared and dragged everyone into swirling portals hanging in the air. Now they’re back in Canterlot... somehow. 156 and 387 are gone, drones are gone, and it’s only them left. Left in the past, to be exact, or some awful version of it.

Why awful? Because this time the ponies were ready.

When the queen ordered the all-out assault, the magical barrier held. Thousands of shocktroopers and drones broke their bodies against it with only a little effect, so infiltrators had to step in and use their stored love to help using energy beams. In the end it worked, but the tired changelings found themselves facing an enemy completely different from what they fought in Canterlot before.

Swaths of changelings were plucked from the sky by catapults and blasts of magic, ripping the army ranks apart. Before the changelings could get into

the streets, the losses were already catastrophic. Army or not, warriors or not, the truth is the changelings haven't faced a real war for even longer than ponies, and that's saying something. Still, where untrained and panicking ponies would quickly fall, changeling discipline as well as copied combat memories and instincts saved them from the worst.

Now they're running for their lives, hoping that if they can get to the castle, the queen's presence and leadership will be something to save them.

559 uses a strength enhancement to rip the manhole cover off and dive into the sewers. 2899, the lowest ranked warrior of the group, is the last one to go in. Once on the ladder, he secures the cover with a layer of sticky goo.

"Alright," 559 turns his head to 918, the only infiltrator of the group, "What the hole is going on?"

"Why do you think I know?!" she barks back between gasping for breath.

"This is either magic or some kind of illusion inside our heads. Even out there, the only hive links I sensed for real were ours. All this is *your* territory, so shapeshift your problem-solving horseshoes on and give me some ideas!"

"No clue where we are, no clue how we got here, even less of a clue as to how we get out. Good en-"

559 slaps her.

"I know you're used to working alone in the shadows, infiltrator, but we're here as a unit. You have us as resources and raw power, we have your world experience and mental abilities."

"I don't-" she objects.

"And I will keep slapping you until you do," 559 interrupts her, "Stop panicking, start thinking."

918 finally catches her breath and looks around. The three warriors are calm but alert and her hive link full of noise from the chaos inside her own mind

finally equalizes and synchronizes with them properly.

What does she really know?

“All I have are guesses and theories.”

“Start with the most realistic one,” says 559, staring down at her.

“I don’t think this is *just* in our heads,” she shakes her head, “No, that’s not right either. Okay okay,” she takes a deep breath, the heavy sewer stench thankfully being something changelings can easily ignore, “One - it’s not in our heads. Two - it’s not entirely real. Three - we should treat it as real because those damn things snatched us from a forest that *was* real. I wish I knew *something* about magic but I’m just a mid-ranked infiltrator-”

“Well done,” says 559, patting her head and immediately dispersing her explanation dissolving into desperate self-deprecation, “So far, we haven’t been attacked directly but we’ve seen changelings fall everywhere around us. Any idea why?”

The warrior’s incredibly out of place and confusing gentle gesture nonetheless helps 918 focus.

“Well, if this is only partially real, or anything of that sort, it could be that the goal isn’t to kill us. I can...” she blinks, “The creatures were invulnerable and some looked like... it might sound silly, but they immediately reminded me of how 387 described the infested changelings in the story about queen Shroud.”

“The burrower worm thing?” asks 559, “I must admit it crept me out somewhat, but according to the story, they could infest changelings almost immediately.”

“Three of the things dragged me down and started puking on me,” 2899 interrupts him, “but I got out and the worms just fell off. I managed to throw up even the ones that got into my mouth before that weird mantis thing snatched me. If they acted like those from 387’s story, I’d be a zombie

now. They still looked terrifying, though, far past anything I've seen around the hive so far."

"I think you hit the nail on the head there," 918 nods, "Whatever those things were, they might be trying to make us afraid instead of killin-"

Her words are drowned out by an explosion of light and heat sending all the grouped up changelings flying deeper into the tunnel. The warriors recover quickly and form a wall in front of coughing 918.

A massive chunk of the sewer in front of them is missing, giving view of the sky above Canterlot. Countless changelings are still dropping like flies but there's only one figure floating above the now evaporated section of the sewers, a figure they recognize from the hive link reports during the invasion, or at least a similar one - a white alicorn, her mane and tail burning like a living inferno around her. Her orange eyes lock at the group, spelling fiery doom for any creature threatening her city.

"You bugs are too smart for your own good," she says, "But make no mistake - you *will* be of use to me, or you *will* die."

The warriors steel their minds and grit their teeth. Their hormonal production changes and stops. After all, what good would a changeling warrior be if they couldn't completely shut off their fear, their pain centers, and everything else stopping them from fulfilling their task? If the alicorn wants them to be terrified, then it picked the wrong willingly mindless fighting machines to mess with.

"I see," the alicorn scowls, "Game over then."

As her horn flares up with magic, they all start running. Not in panic, though, but with an effective, calculated strategy they'll have to think of on the way.

As the surge of adrenaline coursing through 156's body draws to a close, her memory of recent events starts coming back.

Running through the hive, fighting off underground monsters, being...

...being bitten in half.

She lets 387 and 47989 go, and turns around just in time to throw up as her entire body relives the experience. Sometimes, changeling memory can be a curse. Involuntary tears start streaming from her eyes and she resumes shaking. What eventually stops her is the soft touch of 47989's muzzle rubbing her hind thigh.

"No matter what happened, no matter what you saw, I need you to control yourself right now," says 387, "The less calm and collected you are, the greater the chance that the Tantabus will find us. I can keep myself and the dummy hidden but it's drawn to fear, regrets, and the majority of negative emotions, really. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and count to ten. I know it sounds trite, but it really helps."

She wants to argue, she wants to grab his shoulders and shake him until he starts making sense, but some small part of her latches onto the idea that he knows what's going on... somehow.

So, she does as she's told. Then she turns around and simply says:

"Explain everything."

387 blinks and allows himself a half-smirk.

"I'm a little behind on the recent discoveries regarding the theory of gravity. Sneaking books into the hive was pretty difficult."

"I order you to EXPLAIN THIS!" she points at the shimmering green dome surrounding the peaceful clearing. On instinct, she tries to break into 387's mind and fails miserably yet again. How is a *warrior* deflecting her control without even trying?!

"Gee, you're so grumpy *even after* your wake-up hug?" he rolls his eyes, "I'm stumped. 47989, I order you to sort this out."

"Eeee!" the drone hugs 156's foreleg.

“Better?” asks 387 again and immediately raises a foreleg when he sees 156 open her mouth to snarl at him, “And before you do something stupid that might get us both... in trouble, think about what I said before about the emotions. Besides,” he nods towards 47989, “Do you really want to bash my skull in with a rock in front of the dummy? Where else would you get hugs for free?”

She grinds her teeth, glaring at the smirking warrior, but eventually has to admit defeat.

“387, in the name of the hive, I order you to tell me what’s going on. I’m lost, I just died, and only your snarky, bull-headed stupidity is reassuring me that this is real. Give me something... something...”

“What’s the magic word?” 387 sticks his tongue out.

“Abraca-I’ll eat 47989 for love if you don’t start talking?” she says without really meaning a word of it.

“Banter, finally, that’s good,” he breathes out, “Okay... so - where we are, why, and how we get out, I’ll try to summarize,” he taps his hoof on the grass in thought, “Where? This is the dreamscape, a strange semi-reality linking the unconscious minds of most creatures. Why? The dreamweavers dragged us here. I’m assuming they have the power to affect the real world due to our invasion of Canterlot and its effects on the psyche of ponies. As to how we get out...” he frowns, “Last time it was *this* bad, shadow king Sombra enslaved and broke the minds of hundreds of thousands of Crystal Empire citizens and the shadow he cast all over Equestria using the Crystal Heart struck fear into dreams of ponies until he was stopped by Celestia and Luna. *However*, the Tantabus didn’t exist then, and I’m sure its presence enhances the *aggression* of the native dreamscape creatures. The first time I knew about it appearing was a few years ago along with the return of princess Luna. The only way to get out of the dreamscape I know of is to wait until the experience in the minds of ponies fades and the dreamweavers as well as the Tantabus grow weak. We are physically real, we shouldn’t be here. The dreamscape will spit us out.”

156 keeps staring. She's heard of *some* of the events, fragments of history, and she's been operating outside the hive for most of her life. All this brings out the main question again.

"*How* do you know all that?"

387's smirk fades.

"Does it matter? Think about the answer, 156, before automatically spouting something about loyalty to the hive and unconditional obedience to higher ranks and all that garbage queen Whisper instituted."

To her credit, at least in 387's eyes, 156 does think about it before saying:

"I... I need to know. I need to know at least something. I'll let you pick what you tell me but I need *some* answers about you. Why is your hive link different? Why did no one catch on until now? Where did you learn all you said?"

"See? Finally something specific," 387's expression brightens, "One - my hive link is different because I am very very old. Two - no one noticed because the link I allow others to use while communicating with me is fake. Three - same answer as number one. See? Simple."

"You. Didn't. Answer. Anything!" blood rushes into 156's face, turning her cheeks green.

"*Au contraire*, I answered all three questions."

"One more."

"Hmm?"

"One more question and I'll drop it."

"Alright."

"*How* old are you?"

He takes a deep breath.

“The story of queen Shroud, the one I told to scare the drones... it wasn’t one that I *heard* from someone.”

She blinks several times before-

“I WANTED A NUMBER!” she screams.

“Well you should have asked for it, shouldn’t you?” replies 387 brimming with innocence.

“Arrrrrrghrblblbrlbrlbr!” she raises her forelegs to the sky in an incoherent scream of frustration and a possible stroke, tossing 47989 away while foaming, “IHATEYOUUUUUUU!”

“Remember...” 387 smiles widely and leans forward while lowering his voice, “Positive. Emotions.”

156 deflates like a balloon, then crumbles on the grass and starts sobbing while punching the ground.

“Huh...” 387 leans backwards.

That’s when previously tossed away 47989 walks over, sits up on its haunches in front of him, and sharply jabs him in the chest.

“Play nice!” it says.

“Come on, she deserves it.”

Another jab.

“This is a lesson that violence that’s not in self-defense never leads to anything good.”

Jab!

“It’s just *liquid joy!*”

Wibble.

“Don’t you dare wibble your lip at me!”

Wibble harder!

“Hey, I’m just messing with her and she knows it. If it was something important, I would have told her.”

The wibbliest of wibbles.

387 sighs, shoves 47989 out of the way, reaches towards 156’s head, and pats her.

“There there. You win some, you lose some. How about we focus on winning against the dreamweavers before we start digging into each other’s past, okay?” he asks in the most earnest tone he can, “How about this - now that you know how I’ll answer you, you get one more question, hmm?”

She looks up like a puppy who knows it’s been bad before sitting back up. He was right about her questions all along. Before that, however:

“Where is the rest of the group?”

387 nods approvingly.

“I can sense them but I can’t bring them here, not alone. You’re the infiltrator, the changeling made for controlling the minds of others. Willpower and control are *everything* here. My skill is more for... calming, soothing, *understanding*.”

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and when she looks at him again there’s fire burning in them again, and this time it’s not her anger at him.

There is, indeed, only one question.

“I exist to serve the hive. What do you need me to do?”

1313: 3

This particular room in the many cellars of Blueblood estate definitely doesn't look like the repurposed prison where 1313 had been held before nor a common storage. A casual observer might guess that, thanks to the strange magical locking system which completely ignored Zamira and opened automatically for 1313 approaching the entrance, it could be a cellar for the more expensive kinds of wine or even some kind of vault, but they would be wrong.

The overall warmth of the room, the several more normal doors leading holes know where, and the pipes lining the walls dispel the idea, leaving the changeling at a loss as to why Zamira wanted him to come here with her. Other than to open the lock, of course.

"I can't help feeling you're using me for something," he keeps looking at a shallow pool into which roughly 3 ponies might fit with a bit of a squeeze now filling up with hot water.

"*Nonsense*, this is just... so that you get into the spirit of things. You know, do things the Blueblood way," replies Zamira while fiddling with some kind of a control panel belonging to a metal box hanging on a wall by the door.

"You couldn't sound *more* suspicious if you said - let's go to the vault, grab all the gold, and go shopping!"

"What? Noooo..." Zamira waves her foreleg dismissively, "This is absolutely harmless."

"I don't even know what you're so eager about anyway," 1313 gives the small pool an appraising glance, "It looks like a common birthing basin, only with water."

"You'll understand once you get in."

"No, I'm the one with the explosives strapped to me, you go in first."

“And just how is that supposed to- nevermind. So you’re saying I can go in, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“*Awesome!*” she walks in and lies down on her back with the kind of casual indecency only someone with a perfect body can muster, “Ahhhh... this beats the staff shower any day of the week,” she stretches and moans, her wet coat clinging tightly to her toned body, “You sure you don’t want to hop in too? The water’s just *perfect*,” she winks at him, her *feminine wiles* completely failing to even register to the already distraught changeling.

1313 pokes the water surface. Nothing happens, all his bits are still in their right places. He can’t be sure but there *is* a small chance that an explosion would just scatter someone as fragile as him all over the place and, with a helping hoof, it could be possible to put him back together, but as far as plans for getting out of this entire situation go, that isn’t even plan Z, falling more into the territory of plans marked by strings of special characters from alphabets long unused.

Spurred on by the lack of kaboom, 1313 walks into the pool and sits down.

“Not bad,” he says with a shrug, “Still can’t see what all the fuss was about.”

With a devious smirk, Zamira stands up onto all fours, steaming water dripping off of her, walks over to him, pushes him on his back, and looks down at his passive face.

“Gee, Blueblood would already be groping me if we were like this,” she says, “You’re almost sucking all the fun out of this, *almost*,” she reaches past him, making sure to rub as much of her barrel as she can against his muzzle, and 1313 hears the click of a button and the whirring of machinery. She quickly withdraws and props her back against the opposite end of the pool just as-

“Aaah, what’s that?!” 1313 bolts upright, his head turning from side to side as a strange tickling sensation assaults his body from underneath.

“Mhmmmmmm...” Zamira only moans and sinks deeper into the now gently bubbling water, “This is *the* life.”

“Is it... a bath with bubbles?” 1313 asks, carefully lowering himself down again.

“A jacuzzi!” Zamira opens her eyes again, taken aback by the unimpressed changeling, “Don’t tell me this is so common to you that you can’t enjoy it.”

“No, no, this is the first time I’m in something like this,” he shakes his head, “It’s not bad, actually...”

“See? You haven’t blown up so just relax and enjoy the bubble massage- wait, you know what? The knob behind you - set it to 3. That should make things a bit more interesting.”

“Ohhhh, so that’s what you were doing,” 1313 turns around and does his own fiddling, “I thought you were just trying to mess with me with all that rubbing and- oh my!” the background whirring grows a little louder and the empowered streams of bubbles coming from all sides of the pool make him slowly sink back in with a growing dizzy smile.

“Mmmm,” Zamira moans again, shifting in the water, “I *was*. I just didn’t expect it to fail so miserably. You really made me self-conscious there. I know Blueblood has been taking some of the female staff members here on occasion and I doubt it was just to have a relaxing bath together,” she freezes, “I *really* hope they scrub this thing with *acid* after every ‘use’.”

“Thanks for putting that image into my head and making me hope that shapeshifting gets rid of potential STDs,” 1313 sighs, “It probably does, though, otherwise my species would have died out a long time ago. It’s not as if I haven’t done the same thing you tried on me to a pony.”

“As a mare?”

“Oh yeah, it’s a *lot* easier to get away with identity mistakes as a good-looking mare, especially if you just giggle and pretend you’re not that

smart.”

“Sooo... can you look like *anypony*? Or, you know, a griffon, dragon... fun stuff?”

“Pretty much. Hole, I can transform into a rock for a few moments, but a change in mass like that takes a lot of energy to maintain.”

“Hmmm,” she’s now measuring him with an expression of someone who hasn’t eaten for days and now got a free pass to Hayburger, “Since, you know, we’re *alone*, and so... hot already... I’ve always had this idea about a diamond dog. Do they have, you know-”

“Yes,” 1313 immediately catches on. There are some things infiltrators learn very quickly, and one of them is that while there are almost no unicorns in Appleloosa which sits near the diamond dog mines as well as the Badlands, the earth ponies there are *horny* after a day of sweaty work in the sun.

“And could you...?”

“Sure, how *stretched* would you like to feel?”

She blinks, surprised by his sudden forwardness.

“I can *choose*?”

“Obviously,” 1313 is now the one who crawls over to the visibly blushed zebra bodyguard, presses against her, and whispers into her ear, “Would you like to just paint the pool red and green or the walls and the ceiling too?”

“Wha-?”

“I go whoosh, we both go *boom*,” with the final word, he blows hot air into her ear, and unceremoniously stands up before returning to his spot on the other side.

“Gods damn it, I completely forgot!” she facehoofs, realizing she’s been played completely and perfectly.

“You ponies tend to when you’re flustered,” 1313 nods.

“You changelings don’t?”

“An infiltrator? Not in a situation like this. Most lings are genderless, especially drones and warriors, since they spend their time in the hive and don’t need those organs to interact with ponies in that way,” he shrugs, “It’s not as if it’s forbidden to have a gender or anything, even for us low ranks, it’s just not of any use other than adding a weak point to our bodies, really. If we live long enough, though, we tend to gravitate towards one or the other but it’s never as clear cut as with you ponies. I’m a male but it’s so much easier to feed as a mare that I used to spend most of my infiltrating time as a female.”

“Must be nice being able to look like anypony...” sighs Zamira.

“Must be nice being able to grow food without having to steal the love meant for someone else...” 1313 retorts.

“*Touche.*”

“That was uncalled for, it’s just how our bodies work.”

“Touche, not douche.”

“Uhh... I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s prech ponish for ‘you hit the nail on the head’.”

“Oh, I only speak central equestrian ponish. I wasn’t a high enough rank to leave on complicated missions that required knowing different languages and cultures.”

“1313 isn’t high... or low... or...?” she scratches her head, “With the amount of changelings that attacked Canterlot, it has to be one of those.”

“For an infiltrator, 1313 is pretty low. Uhh, high means stronger and better. Most changelings you saw were drones and those are generally like... five digits and more.”

“So there are only 1312 changelings stronger than you? That’s quite the achievement, honestly, and a surprise, considering how easily you... umm... break.”

“It’s not that simple. Sometimes the rank can come in with a specific talent useful for the hive. Let’s say that if I wasn’t so easy to put together after coming apart, I would be somewhere among the topmost drones in terms of power. But hey, luckily I’m not meant for forcing anything and I can focus on infiltrating,” 1313 explains, slowly getting used to the heat and constant massaging and relaxing properly.

“Still,” Zamira rubs his hind leg with her own, “I wish I could say there were just 1312 better guards and warriors than myself.”

“As I said, it’s different with us. It’s not as if all 1312 of us put together could take on rank 1... probably. I met her only once and she’s *scary*.”

“I see, quality over quantity as far as the top ranks go. I like that,” Zamira smiles, “Speaking of quality-”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

“Huh?” both Zamira and 1313 bolt upright. She pokes fake Blueblood, whispering, “Answer it!”

“Yes?” 1313 calls out.

“Zamira, you there?” calls a female voice.

“Yeah, I’m here, I’m here!” the zebra replies out loud, recognizing the voice of another zebra bodyguard from her merc group and relaxing, “What’s up?”

“An invitation to a ball in the castle just came via a courier.”

“Okay, leave it in my quarters. We’ll have a look at it-”

“Quit banging Bluebeling and get prepping! It’s for tonight.”

1313 and Zamira exchange glances.

“In the castle... with the princess,” she breathes out.

“And all the security...” adds 1313.

“Okay okay okay, breathe...” 1313 keeps mumbling to himself as he’s pacing back and forth in Blueblood’s suite, “You’re used to taverns and earth ponies so drunk they can barely recognize even your general shape but this can’t be *that* different, right? You’ve fooled his parents already. Who knows him better than his parents? No one. Point 1, game 1, set 1 to you. Easy, easy, easy...”

“You won’t be of any help if you collapse from hyperventilating,” says Zamira sharply.

“The invitation is for *me, only me!*”

“And, as I’ve told you three times already, that doesn’t matter. Nobles often take a small retinue with them because some of the more paranoid ones don’t trust the castle staff bringing them food. Granted, every time I’ve been in the castle with Blueblood I’ve been the plus one on the invitation but- *stop freaking out!*”

1313 has slumped down on the carpet and propped his back against the bed.

“Rule one of infiltration - ponies easily miss details but quickly notice a broken pattern,” he mutters.

“It’s been a week since the invasion, the city is under reconstruction, and have you read the newspapers yesterday?”

“N-No?”

“There were some incidents in lower Canterlot that required the attention of the *paladins*. In fact, I’d hazard a guess about that being the reason for the show tonight. Nobles will know that and we can play off of that in regards

to extra security. Got it? I would slap you to get it together but I'm worried your head might come off," she walks over to him and presses her nose against his, saying, "I *will* be there with you and we *will* make it believable, got it? Raven, princess Celestia's personal secretary, knows me and even if I'm not on the list, she's seen me by Blueblood's side time and time before."

"Bu-But what if I blow up the second I leave the mansion outside of the schedule?"

"You won't. Blueblood left *detailed* instructions on how the explosive device works."

That makes 1313 pause his trembling.

"Do you mind tell-"

Zamira stare turns *freezing*.

"1313, it's no secret that despite you and your kind attacking this city, I *like you personally* more than Blueblood, but that's not just a low bar, that's a bar that has been buried underground so deep it's melting from the heat. The money Blueblood promised me for this would be a fantastic first step towards early retirement with my own house and several lovers of species varying according to my momentary whims. Hay, if you survive this, I wouldn't be against you alone playing the part of all of those BUT, and it's one of those gorgeous, huge, bouncy zebra butts, right now we're still in the part where I'm in it for the bits. I won't hesitate to blow you up myself if you try to rob me of that. *Kapische?*" she jabs his chest, "That means 'understood'."

"I-I understand," stutters now more confused than scared 1313.

"Then start breathing properly and *focus!*" she turns away, slapping him with her cropped tail, "You're the one used to getting into places where you have no business being. Come up with something!"

1313 closes his eyes.

“Aren’t we overcomplicating this?” he asks after a moment, “Can’t we just decline the invitation?”

“Normally, I would say yes but the invitation was signed by princess Celestia herself. As Blueblood’s aunt, not related by blood I think, it would be rude to deny a personal request like that. Besides, she genuinely likes him for some unholy reason, and he’s always wanted to impress her in order to gain favor and status,” she ponders her words for a moment before reluctantly adding, “Fiiine, he doesn’t act like a completely selfish prick around her so he might like her for real too.”

“That’s good,” 1313 breathes a sigh of relief, “I’m not used to acting arrogant and self-centered. It’s not a way to get love. We could play a ‘prince changed or shaken by recent events’ card.”

“I wouldn’t go for a full change of heart, especially when *changelings* will still be on everypony’s mind. Keep it aloof even if you decide to be a warmer version of Blueblood,” out of nowhere, she claps her hooves together, “I got it, how about a bit of a roleplay?”

“I’m up for anything that increases my chances of not eating a magic murderbeam in the face,” 1313 nods, “Any situation in particular?”

“One I can think of off the top of my head.”

1313 doesn’t like the smirk growing on Zamira’s face but it’s not as if anything on her mind can be worse than failing during the real event.

“Alright, go-”

“You utter *sleazebag!*” she marches up to his face and pretends to slap him, “How dare you ogle baron Starstruck’s wife and then storm out of the museum when I call you out on it?!”

“I’m... sorry?”

“Sorry, SORRY?! You called me FLAT!”

“My apologies, miss, you certainly are not flat. I was way out of li-”

“MISS?! Don’t act like I’m one of those commoner whorses you surround yourself with-”

“PAUSE! Are you seriously going to interrupt everything I’m saying?”
1313 frowns at the zebra.

“Just... trust me on this,” she replies with a strangely weary tone in her voice that makes 1313 doubt she’s just being irritating for the sake of it.

“Miss- LADY! I might not have acted in the *most* appropriate way but I won’t stand for you insulting my highly professional staff-”

“Pause! Kissing my ass won’t get me to go easy on you,” Zamira smirks,
“Yet.”

He puts on his best arrogant expression.

“My staff.”

“Oh pish posh, I know where exactly you’ve been shoving your *staff* even while we were dating and I’ve been willing to look the other way as long as you didn’t *shame* me and my family like you did.”

“*What* did I, in your eyes, do? I was the perfect gentlecolt-”

“Pause,” Zamira raises her hoof, “If you assume you’re in the wrong, you’ll be right most of the time.”

“Geez, is he *that bad*?”

“You have no idea,” she shakes her head, “If his father didn’t pay so well I wouldn’t put up with a *tenth* of his nonsense.”

“Fine but before we continue, can you at least tell me what I did? He- I can’t just *generally* fail at everything I do, right?”

“Can’t you?” she beams, “You might need a pen and paper for this... or a book.”

“Again. I can’t help feeling you’re using me for something.”

“Ahahahaha, you’re so funny!”

“Seriously, we’ve passed a Royal Guard post already and their eyes almost fell out. of their sockets.”

“They’re just jealous of my armor.”

“I GET THAT! That’s the problem! What is it even for?”

“Protection.”

“No, *their* plate armors are for protection. How are a black leather *thong* and whatever the rest of that leather and chainmail gimp suit supposed to be protecting you?”

“Me? It’s protecting *you*. The more ponies are looking at me, the fewer are scrutinizing your trembling hooves.”

“My hooves aren’t- holes, they are...”

“Yep. So keep it together, I’ll be with you the entire evening. That is, unless some important court member makes me the right kind of offer.”

1313 sighs. Zamira notices it and adds:

“Don’t worry so much. Even if somepony promises me the life of a mistress with her own mansion, I’ll see this through with you. I just might need a five or ten minute break to... apply my *oratory skills* on them,” she purses her lips glimmering with gold lipstick.

“You know, since Bluebl-” 1313 stops as he nudges him and corrects himself, “-since my father hired you for my protection but I picked you for, you know, looks... how does it make sense for me to be okay with you skulking off with another noble?”

“He never lets me, obviously!” she hisses quietly into his ear, “But *you* aren’t going to take this chance away from me. are you?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“Of course you do,” she laughs out in a loud, overexaggerated manner, drawing the attention of another pair of guests currently stepping out of a carriage parked in front of the castle. With a wide smile towards them she adds, “MAKE WAY FOR PRINCE BLUEBLOOD!”

Not for the first time in the past week, 1313 ponders whether he really shouldn’t just risk plan B00IVI. On the other hole, it’s not as if he’d still be alive without Zamira so he may as well repay her in some way.

His newfound determination wavers when a duo of Royal Guards presumably responsible for ushering the guests inside cross their spears in front of them.

“Invitations, please,” says one.

1313 gives them a cold glare before letting out a snort of contempt and nodding to Zamira who pulls out the requested gilded piece of paper from holes-know-where in her bondage bikini armor.

“Invitation checks out,” says the guard after scanning it with a beam of light cast by his horn, “Am I correct in assuming that she is your additional protection, Your Highness?” he looks at 1313.

“What does it look like?” 1313 frowns, measuring the guard with barely contained disdain.

The guard looks Zamira up and down.

“She *looks* like-” he begins and stops when guard number 2 puts a hoof on his shoulder and whispers something into his ear.

The corner of 1313’s mouth curls up when his changeling hearing picks up something along the lines of *...harem whore cosplaying one of those OnO female ‘warriors’*. Number 2 bows before 1313 and out loud he says:

“My apologies, Your Highness. Due to recent events, we’ve had to call in Royal Guards from other cities for support and this guy is from Manehattan. They’re a lot less *tactful*. Bronze Hilt, perform a full scan of His Highness.”

Author's Notes:

Ayyy, another two-parter, because I don't know when to stop, and concise is a dirty word in my dictionary.

1313: 4

“What are you checking for?” Zamira steps between ‘Blueblood’ and the Royal Guard aiming his horn at the fake prince.

“We’re under orders to use a changeling detection spell on each guest, *miss.*”

“A lot of good that one did to you last week, didn’t it?” Zamira jabs the guard in the chest.

“It’s an experimental spell developed after the-”

“You’re kidding, right?” Zamira scowls.

“Your Highness, could you...?” the guard looks over the smaller zebra and gives 1313 a pleading look.

“I trust my security staff completely,” 1313 shows no compassion, “What’s the problem, Zamira?”

“Toy soldier over here wants to use *an untested, potentially harmful piece of magic* on you, Your Highness.”

“I can assure you it’s safe-”

“Safe? *Safe?!?*” Zamira shields 1313 with her body, “What mass, long-term study did the unicorn who devised it perform during the *week* since the invasion? What if it causes cancer? What if it makes stallions infertile? This is princess Celestia’s *nephew!* Do you want to be the Royal Guard- I mean ex-Royal Guard- no, *Tartarus inmate* responsible for denying the princess grandnephews, DO YOU?!” she shakes her head with vigor, “You’re scanning me. If you have a problem with it, go call secretary Raven. She knows I’ve been His Highness' escort on multiple castle events.”

The guards exchange exhausted looks and the senior one takes a glance at the growing queue of guests and sighs.

“Scan her.”

A quick buzz of magic later as the unicorn walks around Zamira with his horn almost brushing her coat, he nods towards his superior.

“Heh, you don’t need to spend so much time on my plot. It’s not as if I’m smuggling a changeling there.”

“She checks out,” says the scanning guard.

“Good,” the leading guard bows again, “Have a pleasant evening, Your Highness.”

1313 silently nods and walks through the castle’s main gate, smirking to himself again as he hears a muttered ‘*Canterlot snobs*’ come from the Manehattan guard.

Without access to the hive mind, 1313 has no clue what the interior map of the castle looks like, his only guide being Zamira’s briefing back in the mansion. Thankfully, she seems to know the place well and with her ‘protectively’ walking a step in front of 1313 they successfully make their way into a-

“A staff bathroom?” asks 1313.

“We’re early. Do you want to go to the ballroom and have an in-pony chat with the princess?” Zamira hisses at him, pointing at a locked stall. Unceremoniously, she pulls him into a corner one and locks it behind herself. It’s a hefty squeeze for the two of them but eventually they find a position with 1313 sitting on the closed toilet with Zamira in his lap, “Congratulations,” she whispers, “Blueblood would *kill* to be in your position right now, minus this being the *commoner* bathroom.”

“I wish I was able to shapeshift *certain parts* off right now,” comments 1313.

“Oh, really?” Zamira shifts in his lap.

“Look, if you really want to *have a taste* of the prince without the prince, I’ll oblige you back in the mansion but could you *pleeease* not make this worse?”

“What, is your self-control failing?” she wiggles again, “Huh, it *is*.”

“It’s unconscious! My entire conscious part is too busy contemplating that blowing up might be the merciful way after all.”

“Speaking of blowing-”

“...*shutup!*” hisses 1313, “...someone is coming.”

“Huh?” Zamira pauses just as the outside door handle creaks, “...holy! Good ears...” she whispers.

They wait until whatever staff member leaves again, even Zamira doesn’t tease 1313 further.

“So, how and when do we leave?” asks 1313 when the coast is clear, “As far as I read, this is a stallions’ bathroom for staff only. Neither of us is staff and one *is wearing something that announces the wearer is not a stallion and never can be considered such unless you have two glass eyes.*”

“You worry about the silliest things, really. You are *a prince*. Staff bathroom or not, you can go pretty much wherever you want, so you’re just going to leave first. If there’s nopony looking, I’ll follow you out straight up, if there’s not, I’ll wait a bit before leaving. That way we avoid Blueblood eventually discovering somepony spreading rumors about him banging his guard in the staff bathroom and I can just say that I couldn’t hold it and had to go. No biggie.”

1313 takes a deep breath.

“I trust you.”

“Perfect. Now, you wanna have some fun with these thighs the next time somepony comes in? If we both moan just right, they might think this place is haunted.”

Two hours later, 1313 is forced to admit that being universally disliked does have its advantages.

The ball is in full swing. The podium on one end of the rectangular ballroom hosts a small orchestra conducted by a grey earth pony mare wearing a pink bow tie providing unobtrusive background music. Guests are mingling, bite-sized food is being carried around by the occasional servant, and everyone seems to be having a good time. 1313 himself has been spending as much time as possible without being suspicious at the refreshment tables lining the walls, separated from the central section of the room by pillars splitting the ballroom into the section for the guests and the servants.

Despite Zamira not being allowed to stay by his side all the time -the protocol had staff move through the outside section not to disturb the proceedings in the center- he hasn't been bothered by anyone aside from some vague greetings said his way and him asking about how things were in such-and-such part of Equestria said noble was from.

So far so good.

Right now, 1313 is sitting in a chair by the podium and enjoying the music. It's a bit slow and one of the fiddles is consistently unable to stick to the rhythm, throwing 1313's internal timer off, but the conducting mare is shooting the musician dirty glances which only serves to amuse the changeling. Just as the piece being played ends, she strides towards the offender with a scowl.

1313 knows he'll be more than able to overhear the hushed chewing out even over the general chatter of the room, but before the conductor can get going, the changeling's vision gets obscured by a pristine white unicorn

mare with sapphire blue eyes and an immaculate purple mane styled into curls.

“Can I help you?” asks 1313 and stands up automatically.

The blue eyes narrow.

Uh oh.

“Don’t you ‘can I help you’ me! I want an apology for how you acted during the last Grand Galloping Gala,” she huffs.

Huh, so Zamira wasn’t kidding.

“I apologize completely, milady,” says 1313, driven by the desire to end the encounter as quickly as possible.

That seems to throw the quite likely righteously furious mare off, if only for a few moments.

“Milady who?” she continues, her lips forming a single, narrow line.

“Uhhh...” is all 1313 can say.

“Hah! I *knew* it!” she jabs him in the chest, her hoof sinking in with a quiet crunch which makes her withdraw it immediately. Thankfully, the red and blue uniform 1313 is wearing covers the fact that she just jammed half of her hoof *through* his ribcage, “You don’t even remember my name,” she wails out loud.

Doucheblood, save me now!

“It must have slipped my mind. I’ve been attending way too many events recently,” says 1313.

“I was your *date*, you ignorant oaf!” the unicorn’s voice rises an octave, “You ruined my designer clothes! You made me long for Tartarus the whole evening-”

“And yet you stayed the whole evening,” 1313 catches the hook she inadvertently threw at him. Coupled with his recent experience with Zamira’s long-term goals, he opts for a Doucheblood answer if there ever was one, “Was it just to gain the benefit of my status and influence then?”

“No pony calls me a gold-digger!” she screeches, and slaps-

No, not slaps. Not like a lady.

She punches him with a right hook that would make an Appleloosan earth pony farmer proud.

Crack!

Her jaw drops. Thankfully, his doesn’t, although it remains twisted at roughly a ninety-degree angle.

“Uh- I- I didn’t- whuh-?” she starts stammering.

The ballroom has gone quiet after her affected screech, and in the ensuing silence, 1313 can hear snickering and the occasional whispered ‘*nice*’ from the guests. Before Zamira striding his way joins in and makes the whole mess even worse by getting into a catfight with the surprisingly strong unicorn, he decides on the course of action.

Oookay, too much attention, but being sent to a hospital would be worse.

With a wince, he grabs his twisted muzzle and with a sickening series of crunches returns it into a position consistent with pony skeletal structure, not making any other noise of his own.

The mare’s eyes bulge as her face turns green. Shoving one hoof into her mouth, she manages to get towards the nearest punch bowl before-

“Hurk!”

-loudly throwing up, obscured from view by a pillar.

What a perfect opportunity to leave, actually.

The guests have trouble deciding whether to throw looks of utter disgust towards the unicorn mare or Blueblood heavily bleeding from both nostrils, at least until Zamira arrives and begins cleaning 1313's muzzle with a napkin.

"What *are you doing?!*" she whispers.

"Not my fault, that mare attacked me," he replies in a haughty voice loud enough for the nearest guests to hear, "I think we should take our leave now."

Zamira grits her teeth, hissing-

"Give me five minutes! I've got lord Goldhorn's son wrapped around my hoof, I just need to clinch it."

-before striding off again.

1313 sits down again with a sigh, waving towards the orchestra to get going again.

"Music, if you will," he adds in a tone muffled by the napkin he's still holding over his muzzle.

The 'festivities' resume. 1313 can hear the clicking of cameras as the several newsponies hanging around keep taking photos of him as well as the offending mare and chatting about a scoop of the week. Hopefully, he can relax until Zamira returns.

Of course, it doesn't happen because, as his fragility taught him over his short life, the universe hates him.

This time, the hatred takes form of a deep voice with such authority in it that it makes 1313 stand up even when it calmly says behind him:

"Attention, *Blueblood.*"

He turns around and internally thanks all holes that he can restart his heart after stopping with practiced ease while still keeping his expression at least

marginally still.

How did a unicorn in plate armor and an ALICORN sneak up on me?!

He knows princess Celestia, her image did circulate through the hive mind during the invasion more than enough. The aging, grey, armored unicorn, though, was the one to speak. He knows Blueblood and doesn't need to address him in a formal manner. Why?

Damn it, Zamira! The ONE time I need you, you're off presenting your plot to some useless dignitary.

Okay, so... Blueblood likes Celestia, she likes him, and he calls her auntie even in a formal setting.

1313 gives them both a quick, courteous bow.

"Pleasure to finally see you, auntie."

Maybe ignoring the other guy until he drops a hint about our relationship will be common for Doucheblood.

"You too as well, nephew," Celestia pulls 1313 into a warm hug which lasts until the unicorn clears his throat, "Ah yes. Before we slip into a less formal conversation, Grandmaster Beacon wants a word with you."

NONE OF THAT SOUND LIKE A GOOD THING!

"You missed last weekend's exercises, 'paladin' in reserve Blueblood," he says the title with barely contained disgust, "In light of recent events, I would assume you'd want to at least pretend to be useful."

"How dare you-" 1313 tries to go for his best Doucheblood impression again.

"Don't try that on me, colt," Beacon shoots his attempt down *instantly*, "You never fail to reassure me that you are a waste of my time, and yet my princess still believes that it's possible to forge you into somepony-*something* useful. Even my patience is limited."

“Beacon, I believe that with the attack on his estate, my nephew had his hooves full with-”

Whether intentionally or not, Zamira finds *exactly* the wrong time to take her place by 1313’s side. Beacon looks her up and down, lingering on her backside heavily emphasized and lifted by the tight thong with a snort of contempt.

“I’m certain I know what he had his hooves full of,” he says.

“My apologies,” Zamira speaks up, “The staff estate in general was freaking out so we opted to have His Highness be seen helping clean up some of the mess the changelings made inside, completely forgetting about His Highness’ paladin reserve business. I take full responsibility and will accept any punishment His Highness opts for.”

“Really? You were helping?” asks Celestia with a mix of amazement and genuine happiness, “With your hooves?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It wasn’t just a staged showing off. I mean, it *was* staged but His Highness’s presence during the cleanup really did help matters,” says Zamira.

“Grandmaster Beacon,” 1313 speaks up with a quick glance at Celestia, “To prove I mean it, I will attend one standard paladin training session-”

He winces as Zamira kicks his hind leg with her-

Crack

-breaking his fetlock, of course.

Thankfully, Beacon just rolls his eyes and says:

“If I wanted you dead, *colt*, I would do it quickly and without having to watch you make an ass of yourself. Just be on time next weekend,” he turns around, bows to Celestia, and says, “I’ll take my leave, Your Majesty. With your sister’s continued absence, I need to be out in the city again. As for the other matter...” he trails off.

“Ah, good of you to remind me,” she nods before facing 1313 again, “I apologize, Blueblood. As much as I wanted to have a chat, it completely slipped my mind that I still have matters to attend to even tonight, and I still have to greet other guests. I’ll leave you in the hooves of your capable, albeit a little *unconventional*, bodyguard.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Zamira bows and says with surprising honesty in her voice, “Sorry for the outfit. It was the only thing I could get on such short notice.”

Celestia’s genuinely amused laughter makes her look up.

“I don’t believe that for a second, miss Zamira, but don’t worry,” Celestia leans closer, adding in a conspiratorial tone, “I enjoy all of them attempting to steal a look your way in front of their dates and wives. It does wonders to make the event a bit *livelier*, especially when they get caught. Have a nice evening, both of you.”

With a final smile, Celestia walks off to join another group.

“She knows me...” whispers Zamira in amazement, “I mean, we saw each other before but I thought I was just a face in the crowd... and she’s okay with me being here like this... and-”

“And she smells like a changeling,” adds 1313 in a dark, low tone.

Zamira’s head snaps towards him.

“Come,” she says and leads him limping into a corner where she asks, “What do you mean? That *wasn’t* the princess?”

“Please, fix my fetlock first,” he clears the edge of a table and sits down on it, extending the hind leg Zamira kicked with way too much strength before. When she cracks it back into place and fastens it with a hoofkerchief pulled out of better-not-speculate where, 1313 adds, “No, she’s not been replaced, or it’s highly unlikely at least. It would take a crazy good infiltrator to: one - take real Celestia out, and two - survive in such a position without getting revealed. Any infiltrator of that skill level wouldn’t get sniffed out by me. I

think she touched a changeling right before coming here, likely for an extended period of time.”

Author's Notes:

Too bad Zamira’s plan with Leo Goldhorn fails completely, as we know already, since in some 3-5 years he’s still single and screwing around with servants until he gets bitchslapped into being a proper adult by Cromach in front of everyone, joins the Silver Sun, and eventually marries Fortune. References, references.

CH: 5/13 - Venom

“Words are growing insufficient for how much I hate that couch,” Chrysalis, standing in the doorway, measures the offending piece of furniture with narrowed eyes. She’d spent a big part of the night outside, because while 96 and 68 did their best to keep her fed, she decided that more preparation was in order before the next dive into the hive memories.

If you want something done right, do it yourself.

So, with 68 giving the stallion whose apartment they’re still occupying a good time and 96 out gathering “love”, Chrysalis locks the door, drops her disguise, and plants herself on the cheap couch into which she’s already managed to imprint a groove in the shape of herself.

Damn cheap-ass furniture.

Brimming with energy, she closes her eyes, slows her breathing down, and relaxes. She doesn’t want to force anything, so she simply waits until darkness claims her. Navigating the reflection of the hive mind inside her head has grown easier since her original defeat of her shade, like slowly clearing the house where a hoarder has lived their entire life, and this time she can skip the step of reappearing in the “central hub” - the pitch black area with silvery circles and lines spreading into infinity and marking the nonexistent floor. Instead, she materializes on a wide dirt road during a downright shockingly pleasant, sunny day. Birds are singing, a soothing breeze is moving the tall grass on both sides of the road reaching all the way up to her belly, and she can see the grassland spread towards the forested hills in the distance. The only relevant landmark seems to be a small town towards which the road is headed.

Pony architecture.

However, Chrysalis is looking for a changeling, namely a changeling queen, and likely an infiltrator one. While the encounters so far weren’t overly

dangerous, she can't afford to get complacent.

The whispering of the tall grass goes out of sync for the tiniest moment with the rhythm of the wind, making her ears flick on their own. She can't sense any hive links nearby, though, so unless the reigning queen of the time was a seriously skilled infiltrator, the multiple whatever's slowly moving towards her from both sides aren't changelings.

So far, I was only an observer in these memories. Is it possible that she can manipulate them to have the constructs attack me? That would certainly be a novelty.

While any conflict before reaching the queen herself would be a waste of resources, a small part of her simply can't resist showing off the difference in power and her own inevitable superiority, and she starts heading towards the distant town. With her casual walking, which would still prove rather brisk for a pony due to her size and long legs, the movements in the grass following grow even more audible.

She smirks to herself.

"Get her!" calls out a voice with a slight buzzing undertone.

With her level of control over the hive mind, it's easy to slow the time down to the point of nearly stopping, much more so because there doesn't seem to be anyone resisting her. The time stop gives her the time to process several things - the voice belonged to a changeling, it's one of several, and she can't sense their hive links even now.

Her analytical focus shatters completely when she looks around, resulting in time resuming its flow.

The five changeling drones pouncing at her from both sides with wide smiles and excited looks find themselves hovering in the air, enveloped by the green glow of her telekinesis. Their freezing in the air doesn't seem to faze them as they exchange glances, start giggling, and wave their legs at Chrysalis.

“Wheeee!” they laugh.

What the...? A distraction?

No, there doesn't seem to be any real threat around.

“What do you think you're doing?” asks Chrysalis, lining up the drones to hover in front of her.

“Ambushing you, miss!” replies one happily, “Did we getcha? Did we? Did we?”

Hmm, these memories are much stronger than the shadows before, but they're still only memories, not real living entities like the queens' shades, that's why I can't sense their links.

They had the audacity to attack a queen, even as pretense. Snap their necks, leave one 'alive' to spread the news, and go. It's not as if you'll be killing real changelings. Don't waste time.

Chrysalis grits her teeth as the second thought crosses her mind. That *would* be the right way to go about it. The queen is sacred, the queen is untouchable, the queen IS the changeling race.

And yet... as she watches two drones floating close to each other start playing patty cake, and one near her head summoning enough telekinetic power to bring several strands of her mane towards itself to give it a quick, examining nibble, she simply lowers them down, saying:

“Your technique is lacking, your timing is wrong, and you clearly possess the suicidally wrong instinct for target selection. This isn't a book. If *you* walk up to the biggest creature you can find and punch it to assert dominance, you won't be recognized as the top fish, you'll just get your head ripped off,” she notices the drones' ears drooping and mouths starting to wibble in sync, “But not bad for a first try,” she adds for reasons beyond her own lack of understanding.

The drones beam again immediately and exchange high ones.

“Stop messing around and take me to the queen,” she orders.

They puff out their tiny chests and salute before exchanging confused looks until one says:

“Umm, I don’t think we’re allowed to visit queen Venom-”

“Plus we don’t know where she is!” adds a different one helpfully before getting bonked over the head by a third, hissing:

“Shush, Leafy is speaking all official-like.”

“-but there’s a bunch of older changelings in town,” it points towards the settlement, “The warriors are bound to know.”

Several moments after they start walking down the road, something clicks inside Chrysalis’ head.

“Leafy? What’s your number, drone?” she asks the speaker.

“Uhh...” it scratches its head, almost falling over from doing so while walking, “I dunno, my name is Orange Leaf, though.”

“Orange Leaf...” she frowns.

“It’s because I found an orange leaf last... summ-”

“Autumn,” another drone corrects it, “That’s when trees get all paint-y.”

“Color-y,” adds a different one, “Paint is the thing that makes our goop a different *color*. Got it?”

“Ohhhh, right! Miss Starshine said not to eat those. So yeah, I found a pretty leaf last autumn and I totally kept it and didn’t trade it for anything until it wilted.”

“Yesss, maybe *I’ll* get the shiny star next time,” the corrector hops in excitement.

“Only if you start plussing properly,” Orange Leaf gives the other drone a smug smirk.

“I *can* do my plusses!” the drone frowns, “It’s just the... the big plusses with three digits. You always have to carry something, like one or two, but it’s never ‘carry an egg’... or a cocoon,” the drone looks at the ground and pokes it in a moment of dejection.

“You... can’t count?” Chrysalis raises an eyebrow. If they’re allowed to be around ponies, this must be the peaceful period before the all-out attack Hiss had to deal with. Wasting so much love on individual development for drones is so inefficient it could be fatal in other circumstances, “Why don’t you use hive mind knowledge?”

“We’re not supposed to,” replies Orange Leaf, “The queen said it was important for changelings to grow and learn on our own. That’s why most of us have names too. The older changelings have numbers and that’s cool too, but it’s not like we drones really need ranks anyway,” it shrugs.

That makes Chrysalis pause. It’s true, actually. There’s no real point in ranking drones, it’s more just numbering them for identification. They’re weak, they don’t exactly climb, and the orders they get are from warriors and infiltrators no matter their rank. They’re just... tools for the job, even more than other non-top changelings.

Motivation maybe? Can’t be, their motivation is - do your job so you don’t get recycled.

“I’m gonna outrank you so hard with all my shiny stars from world lessons...” the ‘autumn’ drone sticks its tongue out at Leaf.

“358 plus 817.”

Autumn drone mumbles to itself for a moment before its ears splay back and it scowls at Leaf:

“Hey, that’s cheating! You can’t do plussing either when it ends with more digits than when you started.”

Leaf sticks its tongue out at the other drone:

“Pffffbt!”

“Why, you little-!”

“ENOUGH!” booms Chrysalis. The drones immediately freeze and look up at her, “You, not-Leaf, do you have a name?”

“Not yet, miss.”

“You’re Autumn now.”

“Awesomeee!”

“And now bring me to someone who knows how to get to your queen,” she orders, “No more messing around.”

They all salute as one.

“Yes, miss!”

The memory slowly fades and another one unlocks. Chrysalis knows there was literally no effect she could have on the memory, so there was no difference between solving the situation by naming the drone or killing them all instantly, but...

...but with her mind clearer than ever before, with the hive revenants inside a different host or possibly dead entirely, and with their shades inside her own mind diminished, her sense of urgency and intolerance for anyone not treating her like a queen aren’t pressing on her as much.

With the mental path clear, she dives into the memories again and this time lands in a familiar place from her past but also from queen Venom’s future.

The fortress.

Last time, it was under siege, but now? From the slightly sloping roof Chrysalis is standing on she can see far and wide. Fields of wheat and grass,

a sprawling city of ponies and changelings mixed together and going about their day, not seeming worried about the green cocoons hanging from black pillars scattered throughout. Villages dot the far horizon and, most importantly, there's a changeling queen sitting near the edge and looking into the distance.

Chrysalis makes it just halfway to her before the queen turns her head to her, her eyes glowing with toxic green and her mane of the same color fluttering in the wind.

"Come here, I don't bite," Venom chuckles to herself, "I mean, I *do* but I doubt it would do me any good here and now."

Cautious, Chrysalis remains out of pouncing distance but still joins Venom at the edge of the fortress' roof.

"True, but that didn't stop the queens I faced before you from trying," replies Chrysalis flatly.

"I know and I won't fight you, whether you believe it or not," she gives Chrysalis a soft smile which the real queen deems genuine, "I willingly admit I'm the weakest queen in our history, Chrysalis, and even if I somehow won against you and returned to the real world as it is now I would likely do more harm than good for the surviving changelings," she sighs, but as she looks into the distance again her smile returns, "This *is* was my world, a world of peace built on blood and fear of generations before me."

"It doesn't *look like* a territory of smoldering ruins."

"Indeed, it doesn't," Venom shakes her head, "Do you want to know a rather unique thing about my mother?"

Taken by surprise at the sudden change of topic, Chrysalis only nods.

"Despite being a warrior queen, Mandible knew when to *stop* fighting. Thanks to that, she's still alive."

“What?!”

“Knew it would surprise you,” Venom smirks, “At this point in time, she’s the High-Commander of changeling armies while I focus on everything necessary for us to grow. At a certain point, it’s more important to build up what you’ve taken rather than take even more.”

“That sounds like a personal attack.”

“It was and it wasn’t. I know that the other queens after myself fell prey to the hive mind rage. Their circumstances gave them very little in terms of a safe place to anchor their minds. I was incredibly fortunate.”

“That also means you might have some insight into events that’s different from the rest of us.”

“I do. With that in mind, ask away. My disappearance will, of course, unlock my knowledge of the past for you, but like with others, you’re going to lock it away, temporarily forget it until you instinctively need it so that you don’t burn too much love to maintain memories of generations of changelings before you. So, what do you want to know and *remember*?”

“What is the hatred, disgust, and fury tainting the hive mind? So far, you queens have been more stupid and arrogant rather than angry. What am I going to face?”

Venom gives her a momentarily sad look.

“I don’t know. I only know what it did to my mother before... before I was born. Something about me helped her snap out of the cycle of hatred and, as you know full well since you’re a changeling, it *wasn’t* motherly love.”

“Hmph...”

“You have a daughter, a direct descendant.”

“A warrior. We don’t need a warrior in these times. I made a move which a warrior would do and it nearly was the final nail in our species’ coffin.”

“Avoiding the question of love, or maybe you don’t understand it. It makes no difference here, or maybe it makes all the difference and that’s why we’ve never integrated with other species,” Venom shrugs, “Something about me is different, and my best guess is that it’s a specific genetic configuration from our past. Different branches sprout all the time, changelings with unique traits are born from seemingly random clutches, and I’m one of them. I can barely control my subjects, but I can soothe them, I can guide them, and I can understand them on a personal level better than they do themselves. I think this peaceful -let’s call it presence- was what helped Mandible overcome the rage in the first place. Unfortunately, it wasn’t meant to last.”

“The sudden attack from all sides?”

“Mhm,” Venom nods, “I wish I knew it was coming but in the same way I could shield us from the hive mind rage, I couldn’t tap into the past. Mandible cut herself off completely when she saw how the changes I brought benefited our kind. I hoped I could build a future where we could think for ourselves and the beast would starve without us feeding most of our love to the hive mind. I planned to keep checking the hive mind and not letting anyone use it until it was safe again.”

“The drones... that’s why they were going to pony school,” Chrysalis blinks as the realization hits.

“Not only drones. I came up with the idea for node changelings - infiltrators who served as connections between places so that normal changelings could stick to using directional hive links only for communicating with each other, and preferably not even that. Warriors served with ponies, infiltrators... well, you always need spies, but as a sign of good will, I publicly withdrew the majority of them from Equestria, the Griffon Empire, and Zebrica.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s why you didn’t see the attack coming,” Chrysalis can’t stop herself from that snide remark. To her surprise, Venom only hangs her head low and whispers:

“Exactly.”

The admission stuns Chrysalis, but when Venom covers her face with her forelegs and starts sobbing, it downright paralyzes her.

“We did... we did *everything* right...”

Some part of Chrysalis still think this is a ploy to lower her guard. That part, however, loses its voting privileges as Venom’s crying slowly stops, the queen wipes her eyes, and forces a chuckle.

“Not much of a queen, am I?”

Chrysalis sighs.

“No, you’re not,” she says, “But you might be the most important changeling to learn from. How did the hive mind revenants come back if you did everything to lock them out?”

“It was my daughter Hiss...” Venom shakes her head, “When the first attacks on our borders began, I personally went to negotiate with the ponies but they simply attacked us. I retreated here only to feel the hive mind boiling and then I saw Hiss, draining changelings left and right through the opened hive mind. I felt the presence of all the old queens turn towards me and look at me through Hiss’ eyes. For a moment, she became incredibly powerful, but there was only one target the queens wanted dead, and it wasn’t the ponies. I got absorbed into the hive mind once she killed me and they withdrew from her, leaving her among drained changelings and with enemies beating on our doorstep.”

“Yep, that *does* sound like the queens. They always had their priorities straight,” Chrysalis finally dares to approach Venom and pat her head. The other queen leans into the touch, “How did you maintain all this anyway? I thought farming ponies for love was impossible. I mean... that’s what the hive mind memories kept saying- and now I realize how moronic I just sounded.”

Venom shakes her head.

“It *is* impossible, at least as a long-term solution. The venom-induced love is tainted and you always get less and less if you force the issue. However, I gave ponies plenty of rest, the chance to live their lives with their loved ones, and only occasionally cocooned them, so they recovered quickly and the love we drained was nourishing in the hooves of the right infiltrator skilled at mixing. I had help in the early stages, though, from *Scream*,” Venom gives Chrysalis a devious smirk, “Which, I believe, is the second topic on your mind.”

Chrysalis’ ears perk up but she still narrows her eyes in suspicion again. Venom *might* be able to read the upper layers of her mind but definitely not without Chrysalis sensing *anything*.

“I was wondering about what she was doing during your time,” she controls herself.

“I can only speak to her presence here, since I lost a lot of spies all over the world, but it wasn’t anything nefarious in regard to us. She was behind a Cult of Lust which connected ponies and changelings and mediated safe gatherings all over the territory, be they orgies or just simple pairings where a pony would have fantasies another pony couldn’t fulfill. The cult grew like wildfire and was integral to ponies stopping to see us as bug monsters.”

“Unity through the bedroom,” comments Chrysalis with a smirk.

“Bedrooms, kitchen counters, tables, public venues, anything,” Venom nods back, “*Scream* also personally taught several of my top infiltrators methods for properly riling ponies up even we didn’t know.”

“She didn’t simply teach you?”

“I had my hooves full with figuring out ways to mix the huge amounts of lust and tainted love with what little real love we were bringing in to make this sustainable for all changelings. It got easier as ponies eventually realized we were just another species to be friends with and to love as well as changelings stopping treating ponies like prey. Our feeding isn’t fatal by any stretch, though it is mentally straining, so both sides realized that caring for each other was the way to grow,” Venom looks into the distance again

and her dreamy smile returns, if only for a short moment, “Well, we both know how it ended. I think this is where we should end our session, and I wish you well. All I can do now is hope you can do better than me.”

Chrysalis remains silent and the two queens simply watch the scenery before she says:

“Violent and forceful queens failed ten times. A peaceful and nurturing queen only once.”

Venom starts laughing as she slowly vanishes and the wind spreads the chiming of her joy all over the territory for one final time.

Chrysalis’ surroundings fade to grey and in the next moment she stands up from the couch back in Manehattan. Green sparks fly off of her hooves the second she touches the carpet, making 68 who’s now standing on guard give her a surprised look.

“You look... different, Your Majesty,” she says.

“I feel better than I’ve felt in a *looong* time, 68.”

True to her word, Venom must have done something more than avoid draining Chrysalis’ love, as the entire experience has left the living queen revitalized instead of drained for the first time, and with a much clearer head.

She connects to 96’s hive link with a simple command: “*Finish your current assignment and then return immediately.*”

To 68, she adds:

“We’re leaving. If there are any survivors of my failure at Canterlot, they’ll be moving to the Everfree forest outpost or straight through it to the hive. We’ll start gathering them there and send whomever we can to search for others.”

“What about those we already gathered in Riverside?” asks 68.

“I’ll be shocked if that place *isn’t* crawling with Royal Guards, rangers, and anyone with any tracking ability whatsoever. For now, they’re on their own,” she shakes her head, “Besides, the worst part of my mental journey is yet to come. I’m going to need a base where we can gather changelings without arousing suspicion and where I can isolate myself safely if needed. Once we’re stable, we’ll send scouting parties to figure out what happened to them.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Now, go out and use the bits you and 96 gathered to buy us some supplies for the road, I’ll stay connected and think of what we’ll need while you walk. This damn city never sleeps, so some shops must still be open.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

As 68 leaves, Chrysalis looks around the apartment and starts gathering anything useful. After all, they’ve blessed the pony with night after night of enjoyment while using up only his water, so it’s time he paid them back.

Author's Notes:

What? Not even a slap fight? Did I just manage to make even *less* happen than usual?

1988, 9999: 5

They've been tailing the pegasus security guard for the entire day, and even the latest area check from the dark sky hasn't shown any lights on the horizon. Wherever he's travelling to, he's still way away.

1988, as an infiltrator, has been leading the pursuit. 8622, much less used to sneaking around as a hive guard has kept her distance. Thankfully, the security guard hasn't been travelling quickly, apparently knowing the trip would be a marathon rather than a sprint. For the two changelings it meant they've been able to keep up. In general, the bigger wings of pegasi allow them to fly faster than changelings while the changeling ones allow for better maneuverability.

Buzzing through the air, 1988 locks his eyes on the tiny lit dot ahead which slowly begins its descent into the endless forests underneath.

Okay, so... roughly 16 hours away from the camp and he's been flying the whole time. If I'm exhausted and I refilled on love before we left, he's bound to be too. Unfortunately, he can just eat dinner, have a rest, and be alright tomorrow. I'm running on batteries here.

He connects to 8622 and says through their hive link:

"This is probably our best chance to ambush him. I'm going to need energy to mess with his head and to return back to the camp."

"Understood," replies 8622 simply, *"Plan?"*

"Take him out without leaving a mark. I'll check what the message he's carrying contains and scramble his short-term memory so that he has no idea what happened. We do it like this..."

Several minutes later, the quiet buzzing of 8622's wings makes the security guard look up from a small heater he's set up under a tree and immediately jump towards his backpack.

8622 tackles him to the ground, unwilling to punch him out. Any physical marks of their encounter would only lead to suspicion and make 1988's mind-manipulation more difficult. The guard under her primes his hind legs and kicks upwards, sending the lighter changeling tumbling backwards.

Just as she gets up and charges at him again, he manages to reach into his backpack and throw something small at her which explodes mid-way into brilliant white flash lighting a good chunk of the forest.

"I *knew* you weren't to be trusted!" growls the pegasus as he stops shielding his eyes and pulls out a telescopic blackjack from the backpack. 8622 backs off on three legs, covering her face with the fourth but for all intents and purposes she's blind. Fortunately, she's still a warrior and the sound of hoofsteps as well as the swish of the blackjack swinging toward her through the air allow her to sidestep the first blow.

Not the following punch, though, as the guard surprises her by not going for a big weapon swing again, instead simply disorienting her further.

Swish!

8622 backs off successfully this time, blinking over and over to repair her vision. Just a few more seconds and she'll be able to fight ba-

With another step backwards, she trips on an unexpected upwards slope and falls on her backside. She hears the pegasus jump forward and raises both forelegs to block the inevitable blow...

...which doesn't come. All she hears are strained noises followed by a quiet thud.

"Took your sweet time..." she comments.

"Sorry, this needed a pretty specific type of venom and I'm a lot more exhausted than I thought," replies 1988, standing over the unconscious pegasus sporting a vampire-like bite mark on his neck, "Take a breather, I'll check his bag."

It's much easier to fix her eyes in peace. Within the next few minutes, 8622 is back on all fours and examining the pegasus.

"I thought we agreed on no physical marks. I could have punched him out even before he set my retinas on fire and saved myself a lot of love," she says.

"That's why I said *specific* type of venom," 1988 doesn't even look up from the guard's backpack, "It'll heal the bite through the night. Hmmm... nothing in here but tools, weather clothes, and supplies. Does he have anything else on him?"

"You mean this?" she presents a scroll case previously tied to the pegasus inner hind thigh, hidden under windbreaker pants. 1988 takes it, unscrews the lid, and pulls out a selection of papers.

In the light of the pegasus' lantern hanging on a tree branch above them, 1988 starts flipping through the rolled-up sheets.

"Report - materials, report - injuries, report - schedule, report - daily events. Looks like Sawtooth stayed true to his word and didn't write anything about us- ah, here we go," 1988 frowns, "Special security log, different hoofwriting. That must be our pegasus. Date when we appeared, our descriptions, numbers, activities. If anyone who's even *heard* about the Canterlot invasion reads this, we'll have proper guards on our backs instantly," he crumples the special log sheet, spits on it, and watches it evaporate without a trace, "Now for this rat."

He puts his horn to the pegasus' forehead. With the venom already coursing through the pony and seeping into his brain, even a low-rank like 1988 can start messing around.

So... no memory of being suspicious of us enough to write a special report, just Sawtooth's monthly summaries. No memory of our attack, he just stopped to have a good night's rest, since he had no reason to rush. He scratched his neck on a tree branch, just in case the bite mark doesn't heal perfectly.

Twisting the pegasus' feelings, memories, and intentions takes him nearly half an hour and leaves him dizzy and gasping for breath. As he stumbles away to gather himself, he asks:

“Could you please tidy the place up?”

8622 nods and begins working on putting the campsite into a presentable state. Once 1988 recovers, he adds a few finishing touches she missed, specifically the hoof marks left behind after the tussle.

They remain nearby, resting through the night, just in case the pegasus would show any signs of suspicion. When he eats breakfast in the morning and leaves without anything making 1988 suspicious, they start making their way back.

9999 slowly opens its eyes and yawns. Why is it so tired? Why is its head pounding? Didn't it just have a full night's sleep, something drones almost never experienced?

It pushes itself into a sitting position, winces at yet another spike of pain, and finds itself sitting in the center of a circle of all the other drones giving it worried looks.

“Uh.. hi?” it tilts its head quizzically, “Is something wrong?”

“You tell us,” replies 13415, “You've been groaning and moaning since the shiny first showed up,” it nods towards the still dim sky slowly lighting up.

“I... my head. Something is wrong,” 9999 rubs its temples. On a quick check-up of hive links, it realizes the problem, stumbles onto all fours, and begins limping towards motionless 9013 while muttering, “Holesholesholes!”

The confused drones follow 9999, unsure what's going on and unclear on what to do about it.

“His link is gone!” 13415’s eyes shoot open as the second highest-ranked drone present finally catches on while 9999 is poking the unresponsive warrior, “Wait, but why can we still talk... when...?” its eyes stop on 9999, “High Score, do you have any idea how awesome you are?” it says in amazement.

“I’d trade... less awesome for getting rid of... this splitting headache,” 9999’s strained voice makes two drones rush to its sides and help prop it up. The world is a scary place and drones have to stick together in the face of any threat no matter what.

“Headache? Goop its head!” yells someone, which does wonders for making 9999’s headache worse.

“No holes! There’s nothing to goop!”

Panic spreads.

“Goop *inside* its head!” comes another suggestion.

“Ha, you’re a genius!” 36658 hops up and down in response.

“I dunno what that means, I’m 33125,” the responsible drone tilts its head.

“I’m gonna need more love... and bark. 57999, I need your stash,” 36658 continues.

“Sure!” the second bark-eater disappears into the nearby tree line and returns carrying a stack of birch bark chunks which 36658 grabs and begins shoveling into its mouth, “But you owe me for this...” 57999 mutters, “At least, umm, three colourful leaves and a useful twig.”

“You -nomnomnom- get a -nomnom- my turn -nom- with the shiny,” 36658 successfully gulps the first load down as the other drones gasp at the reward for 57999 and, before starting working on another, adds, “And I need love. Can anyone spare?”

“We can’t... be trading... love now,” says 9999 wearily, “We don’t have... enough.”

“You can cocoon me for insubordination when you can at least talk properly again,” 13415 sticks its tongue out at 9999 and checks the love levels of the three Silents before pointing at the one with the most, “You, come here and give most of your love to 36658.”

The Silent walks over and puts its horn to the chewing drone’s forehead. 13415 does the same while saying:

“Just so you don’t think I’m just blowing smoke.”

36658’s eyes flash with energy as it straight up unhinges its jaw and swallows the rest of the bark. Then it burps. Again and again. 13415 and the Silent plop down on the grass, fighting off nausea and exhaustion from the sudden and quick drain.

“HURK!” 36658’s throat bulges before...

“Hrk- pfoo!” it spits out a small, green, vaguely changeling-like figurine made of goo, and gives it to 57999, “Give it to -hurk- High Score -ugh- to eat -blh- and *digest*.”

Most drones are finally catching on. After all, they’ve been the recipients of birch bark goo last night, albeit only externally. Contrary to popular belief, changelings *can* shapeshift to digest normal food, they just get absolutely minimal nutritional value out of it due to it requiring the complete restructuring of their energy absorption system. On the other hole, that doesn’t mean they can’t transform a single internal organ to absorb certain chemicals for full effect. After all, they still have a somewhat standard heart and a brain.

Not that the drones know that on any other than instinctive level. Their direct knowledge of biology consists mostly of “stuff pours out when bits break off” or “when some bigger squishy bits fall out, they need to go back quickly”.

“Blrlblblr!” 36658 throws up another one, which 13415 catches before it hits the ground, “No... to 9013.”

Over the course of the next ten minutes, 36658 produces several more goolings and stops dry heaving, although its belly is still slightly distended.

Something akin to a drawn-out sigh passes through the hive links of everyone around, and 9013 slowly opens his eyes.

“What...?” he whispers.

“Reporting!” 13415 salutes, “Something went wrong. You fell unconscious and 9999 kinda held the hive mind together for the past hour-or-so. 36658 made some pretty nifty painkillers but it cost us love and frankly an unreasonable amount of zebra bark. Do you need more? We kinda need 9999 to be able to plan stuff and, for it to do that, you gotta be the hive mind guy again.”

9013 attempts to push himself on all fours, fails, and remains lying down.

“Yeah.. yeah... I think I can,” he looks at 9999 slightly dizzy from a dose of painkillers enough to ensure a good evening for a small village, “A *drone* kept this going, even for an hour?”

“9999 isn’t just *any* drone, it’s High Score the Shiny-bringer!” 13415 beams, wrapping its foreleg around 9999’s shoulders.

“I’m not even... going to pretend to know... what that’s supposed to... mean,” 9013’s eyes close again as the warrior’s head slowly drops onto the grass.

“Is he-?” 13415 releases 9999, lowers its muzzle, and sniffs 9013.

“He’s alright,” says 9999 with a suddenly much steadier voice, “I can feel him and the headache is going away. I...” it blinks and taps the ground with its hoof, “Hmm, this could help - how about a few of you tap into me for the time being? One or two maybe, preferably someone who stays in the camp, and the rest keep using 9013’s link. That way no one will have to hibernate and it could help ease the strain on 9013.”

“Me!” 36658 raises its foreleg, “I wanna try something new with the ponies today so I won’t be far,” it pats its belly.

“I need to gather more bark but I got 36658’s shiny time today,” 57999 shakes its head.

13415 shakes its head too.

“I may be tired but I’ll help like 57999 and 36658 did yesterday. We need to keep showing ponies we can carry stuff like the best of them.”

“Ooh! Ooh! I’ll go too!” 91887 bounces up and down like a rubber ball on cocaine, “I wanna ride the huge fluffy pony too.”

One by one, the drones go about their search for a way to score points in order to win a turn with “the small shiny”. 9999 ends up with 2 drones connected directly to it in addition to all 3 Silents who thankfully don’t take too much to keep going. Unfortunately, even that leaves it in the same state as 9013 - curled up in the grass in a half-asleep state.

It sucks but right now it’s the best way to be of use, and that’s the only thing that matters.

“Hiiii!” 36658 peeks through a sliding curtain into a cargo container turned infirmary, only to be greeted with a frown from a white unicorn mare wearing a white collar with a red cross who asks:

“Can I help you?”

36658 nods towards the only patient on the bed in the back.

“Can I visit mister Uproot?”

“Uproot is supposed to avoid stress-” says the medic.

The pony in question sits up and interrupts her.

“It’s alright, Triage. I’m pretty sure these guys are the least stressful thing around.”

“...speak for yourself, they’re creepy...” she mutters. To 36658, she adds:

“Fine. The patient is alright with it, go ahead.”

36658 approaches the bed and smiles at Uproot.

“Hello!”

“Umm, which one are you?” asks the pony, “I can’t really tell you creatures apart... other than you being a little chubbier than most.”

“I’m 36658. I was helping mister Hacksmith yesterday so that you two wouldn’t fall behind with all the woodcutting.”

“Ah, the bark-chewer. Hack told me about you.”

“That’s me!” 36658 pauses, “Wait, that would fit 57999 too. I’m not 57999, I’m me, 36658.”

“Alright, alright, let’s stop with the math homework,” Uproot raises his foreleg, “Why did you come to see me?”

“Oh, right!” 36658 shakes a goop changeling out of a hole in its foreleg, “I made you this!” it presents the ‘medicine’ to Uproot who takes it with a quizzical expression.

“What is it?”

“It’s a goomy ling! It helps with pain. It’s from zebra bark and goop and it super works. 9013 had a huuuge headache this morning and is totally okay now. Sleepy but okay.”

“So... is that like a chewable painkiller?”

“Aaand here’s where I’m going to step in,” Triage sweeps in and takes the medicine from Uproot, “I can’t have a patient eating unsanctioned, home-

brewed painkillers.”

“What if I called it... agonyslayer?” 36658 pouts.

“The name isn’t the problem.”

“I *could* use something to help me sleep,” says Uproot.

“Forever?!” Triage scowls.

“I wouldn’t hurt mister Uproot!” 36658 frowns back at her. It doesn’t faze her.

“How much do you know about pony anatomy?”

“You ponies are warm and soft. What bit is your anatomy?”

Triage facehoofs.

“My point exactly. Uproot is taking heart medicine. Mixing painkillers-”

“Agony-”

“Shut it. Mixing unknown painkillers with it could cause serious trouble for him. Maybe, and that’s a *huge* maybe, if I could perform some tests on a sample I’d be able to identify if it could help or at least not make things worse.”

“Oh, is that all?” 36658’s face brightens up, “Here!” it offers another goomy ling to Triage, “I can make more later.”

“Triage, didn’t you say we were running out of painkillers due to our schedule being borked and everypony overworking themselves?” asks Uproot.

“Hmph, there’s a world of difference between some moonshine-level stuff and clinically tested medicine with known side-effects,” objects Triage.

“And can you run a test or two, maybe on a willing pony, hmm?” Uproot winks at her, “I know a few who could use something to relax their muscles before going to bed.”

Triage sighs and takes the goomy ling out of 36658’s still outstretched hoof.

“Alright, I’ll run some tests on these two. You’d have to clear any trading deal with Sawtooth, though. He manages supplies and stuff.”

“Oh, I don’t want anything for it. They’re pretty easy to make,” 36658 shakes its head, “I think 9999 and 1988 just want us to get to know you ponies.”

“Really?” asks Triage suspiciously.

“Mhm,” 36658 only nods.

“Hmmm,” Uproot rubs his chin thoughtfully, “Triage, mind leaving us alone for a minute?”

“Umm, sure?” she stops setting up a microscope and some glass dishes, and leaves with, “Five minutes. I’ll go grab a drink. And if you even think about taking one of these green things behind my back, I’m releasing you back to work immediately.”

“Nice lady,” says 36658, “but I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“She’ll warm up to you guys once she gets to know you. Now, as to why I wanted us to be alone,” Uproot leans closer to 36658, “How many of those green things have you got?”

“A bunch. I didn’t want them to be too strong to knock 9013 completely and I misjudged the amount of bark I needed. Why?”

“I could point you towards a few ponies who might want to try some without Triage knowing.”

“Neat! But won’t they be suspicious like she was?”

“Just tell them I sent you and that the medicine could be, ehm, *recreational* but we need to test the dosage.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just tell them that, okay? And if it works, we might trade something from our personal things for more. We have some bits here.”

“Bits of what?”

“Bits - money, gold.”

36658 scratches its head.

“Umm, we don’t really need that but some of the guys would like to own a shiny or something useful. Or-” the drone bounces up and down, “Could we get hugs? Love hugs or friend hugs, doesn’t matter.”

Uproot blinks in surprise and smirks.

“If this works the way I think it might, ponies here will be lining up to friend-hug you.”

“Yaaaay! Lines of hugs!” 36658 cheers, “9999 will be so happy!”

“Sooo... you’re not the two bark-eating ones from yesterday then?” asks Hacksmith as he and his two new companions head towards his and Uproot’s logging site, “I swear you guys look all the same.”

As if pondering this for the first time, the two drones exchange curious looks that linger on each other.

“Hmmm...” 13415 shakes its head after a moment, “Nope. See? The scratches and bruises on 91887’s carapace are completely different from mine, the layout of leg holes is too, and its eyes glow a different shade of teal.”

The earth pony keeps looking from one drone to the other before shaking his head in desperation, grabbing a nearby flower and sticking it into 91887's leg hole.

"There. Now I can tell you apart, at least until it falls out."

"Oh, if it's just about outside markings, we can trans-" 91887 starts speaking before its hive link opens.

"1988 SAID NO TRANSFORMATIONS!" 13415 mentally yells at it.

"Oh, right. Sorry..." 91887's ears droop.

"Yes?" asks Hacksmith, completely unaware of the mental exchange.

"We can tell others to find something unique to mark them," 13415 finishes the thought, "We can tell each other apart just fine so we've never had to think about it. Speaking of which, I'm 13415."

"I'm Hacksmith. The whole number thing is still crazy to me," he says, "But since you don't have cutie marks, I guess it must be tough figuring what you're good at."

"We're drones, we're good at digging and carrying stuff," 13415 shrugs, "We don't really need any more distinctions."

"Just that? Is that all?"

"We've never really needed anything else. Warriors do guarding, inf-change- *explorers* like 1988 are good at... talking and knowing things, and we do the menial work."

"Wooow, we have explorers?" 91887's eyes jaw drops, "You high ranks know all sorts of awesome stuff!"

"Well, I can't exactly tell a pony we have a designation called 'an infiltrator', can I?" 13415 facehoofs mentally.

“Oh, right...” replies 91887, “Sorry, I just got excited. I didn’t think I’d ever be talking to a REAL pony.”

“You guys *are* pretty strong for your size,” Hacksmith admits, the telepathic exchange obviously missing him again, “But is that all? I mean, 9999 has been the one speaking for you, right? Then there are the two bark guys. Don’t you two have anything special you can do or anything you want to do that others don’t?”

“Twannarideapony!” 91887 blurts out before 13415 can say anything.

“Is that all?” asks Hacksmith with a smirk, “Hop on.”

“EEEEEE!” 91887 buzzes up on him and starts kneading his back like a cat, “So soft and fluffy!”

“9999 said exactly the same thing, you know?”

“And it was absolutely right! That’s why it’s 9999 and not... not... umm... 10101010!” 91887 nods vigorously, “13415, wanna ride too? We can both fit here no problem.”

“I’ll pass,” 13415 shakes its head, “You have fun.”

“Yaaay!”

“No jumping! That still hurts,” winces the earth pony when faced with the sudden flurry of movement on his back.

“Okay!”

The movements stop as 91887 simply lies down and starts rubbing its face against the pony’s coat.

“Heh, some wishes are easier to fulfill than others,” comments Hacksmith.

“Agreed,” 13415 nods.

“You sound like you have a difficult one on your mind.”

“I... I want to reach the high score, obviously, but... but 9999 is doing such a great job that I don’t think I can do that. Plus, it knows a trick only warriors know. To beat that, I’d have to know something even better like... a... a QUEEN-tier trick!”

“Like being mean and shouting orders?” asks 91887, proving once again that being abandoned by Chrysalis was the biggest stroke of luck it’s ever gotten.

“A good queen-tier trick,” 13415 corrects itself.

“A queen, huh,” Hacksmith raises an eyebrow, “Learning that is bound to take some time. Still, I’m from the Stalliongrad area and in politics, when somepony can’t win by simply being good, they try to smear the competition, or make it disappear. Not that I’d advocate doing anything of that sort, I like that little guy.”

“BOOO!” he hears from his back before-

Chomp!

-a rather harmless bite lands on the back of his neck.

“Yeah, that’s *mean and also cheating!*” 13415 gives him the nastiest look Hacksmith has seen from one of these bug ponies so far, “Only warriors and in- explorers do that to climb! The world is scary enough for us drones so we have to stick together.”

“Yeah!” mumbles 91887 through its teeth still clasped on Hacksmith’s neck. Then it suddenly releases the grip and straightens up, “Hmph, I don’t know if I want to ride a mean, cheating pony like this anymore...”

That, for reasons beyond the understanding of mere mortals, makes Hacksmith’s heart skip a beat.

“No no no no,” he says quickly, “I’m sorry, I didn’t *mean* you should do that. I even said I liked 9999,” being trained by years of fatherhood, he quickly figures out an offer, “Hey, do you know what a rodeo is?”

“No,” both changelings shake their heads.

“Okay, okay. Grab my neck and try not to fall.”

“Why would I f- eep?!” 91887 bounces as Hacksmith hops a little which makes the drone bounce and clamp its forelegs around his neck.

“Told you,” Hacksmith smirks, “That was a practice round. Want to have a go for real?”

“You’re on!” calls out 91887 in excitement and bites down on the earth pony’s mane.

13415 watches Hacksmith flail and bounce as 91447 holds on for dear life. It’s clear the pony isn’t *really* trying to drop the drone, but after a short while of walking along, 13415 has to timidly ask:

“Ummm, can I have a turn too?”

Author's Notes:

Another two-parter, since this particular drone day is taking a bit longer. Am I the only one who feels this is dragging on, or just writing drones chilling like this okay?

1988, 9999: 6

Okay, okay. Breathe! You can do it.

Almost everyone is gone and that mare doesn't look TOO scary.

I mean, she Is kinda big and has a bunch of stabby things at hoof.

If you chicken out, though, no shiny tomorrow and, worse part, High Score will be disappointed.

Okay, okay. So... 3... 2... 1-

“What are you doing?” asks a stern voice from behind.

“AAAHH! YOUWERESUPPOSEDTOWAITFORGO!” 17070 bolts forward. The first rule of drones in danger - if you hear a noise, run first, examine later. Drones who ask ‘Look, is that a gribbly choker behind me or is that a stabby corpisifier?’ instead don’t tend to live long.

After a quick few breaths, 17070 turns its head to see a pegasus wearing a blue jacket and a tool belt staring at it with a frown. Unfortunately, looking backwards while galloping ahead at full speed never pays, because-

Boinggg!

-it bounces away after hitting something soft and squishy, yet not budging at all.

“Is that thing bothering you, Ladle?” asks the unicorn as 17070 shakes its head, trying to gather itself off of the ground, “I’ve been watching it pace back and forth for the past five minutes, muttering to itself and looking at you.”

“No no,” replies the chubby earth pony mare with a chuckle, “Thanks for the concern, Keen,” she smiles towards the unicorn security guard who

nods and heads away.

17070 just stares, mouth agape, at the light brown mare with mane that rivals the tealness of changeling eyes tied into a ponytail.

“You’re one of the critters camping over there, are you?” she asks, pointing a kitchen knife towards the southern edge of the camp. All 17070 can do is nod with its eyes locked on the weapon. The mare apparently going by Ladle leans closer, which makes 17070 lower its head between its shoulders, “Come on, honey, don’t be scared,” she says, putting the knife away and slowly reaching towards the drone, “You were the one staring at me, not the other way around. Did you need anything?”

17070 sniffs the hoof in front of its muzzle.

Hoof smells weird. Not bad but weird, like a mix of too many sharp scents that don’t go together. She doesn’t seem angry, and the armed pegasus is gone.

Hmmm...

“I, umm,” it begins, “9999 said we’re supposed to try to get to know you ponies and see what we can do to help. 36658 and 57999 helped with woodcutting yesterday and everyone is trying to find a way to be useful too, but there’s no one around anymore other than you,” 17070 has finally gathered the courage to go all in, “Whatcha doing with all those metal thingies?” it waves its foreleg past Ladle towards the assortment of weapon-like tools.

“I’m the head cook here,” she smiles and shakes her still extended foreleg, “Name’s Swirling Ladle.”

17070 gives the foreleg a quizzical look. The gesture is familiar but the hive mind bandwidth 9999 is managing to provide for the connected changelings is limited and the knowledge fragmented at best. Feeling somewhat lost, 17070 boops Ladle’s hoof with its nose and says:

“Your hoof smells funny.”

“That’s impolite, little one,” Ladle frowns.

“Huh? What did I do? I’m sorry, I don’t know how you ponies do things. If it’s about the hoof, then I totally didn’t smell anything,” the drone clamps its hooves over its nose.

Ladle’s expression softens and she pats 17070’s head.

“You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Oh? Oh!” 17070 facehoofs, “I’m 17070. We don’t have names like you ponies, it’s much less confusing.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ladle shakes her head and turns around, “So, 17070, you were curious about what I was doing then?”

“Mhm,” the drone nods. Seeing no immediate danger, it takes place by Ladle’s side as she resumes fiddling with a big cauldron hanging over a smaller fire pit a short way away from the still crackling central one where the ponies seem to be making the big campfire each evening, occasionally reaching for her tools placed on an uprooted tree stump next to it.

“I was getting the lunch ready. Stallions are off playing with their logs-” she pauses for a breath and pouts a little as the joke is completely lost on 17070, “-but there are still a few of us here in the camp. Triage, Uproot, Keen Eye, Sawtooth, the foals and us mares,” she swipes a small pile of chopped vegetables into the cauldron and begins stirring the liquid, “Plus, when everypony’s back in the evening, the stew will have had time to simmer.”

17070 observes in silence for a moment until Ladle does something completely inconsistent with its limited knowledge of ponies.

“Huh? You ponies eat rocks?” it stands up on its hind legs and props itself on the cauldron. Unlike skin, chitin allows for touching hot surfaces without any problem, at least temporarily.

“Rocks?” Ladle furrows her brows, looks at her hoof, and asks, “Do you mean this? The salt?”

“Yeah! The white stuff,” 17070 nods.

“It’s for taste. I’ve got a few other spices here but I have to be careful with those until fresh supplies arrive. Too bad, since I can cook a mean borsch. What do *you* critters eat?”

“We eat love!” 17070 smiles, “We don’t like mean things, though, not even food. How can food even be mean anyway? Does it bite back, or dodge?” 17070 raises on its hind legs again and punches the air a few times before losing balance and faceplanting on the ground.

“It’s just an expression meaning the food is delicious. Love, you say?” she tilts her head while pulling the ladle out and sniffing the liquid, “Hmph, needs more pepper,” she reaches for the supplies on the stump, “How does one eat love?”

“It’s hard to explain to a pony, miss,” 17070 shrugs, “But if someone likes us, we can kinda eat it and live off of it. I mean, we drones don’t hunt for love ourselves since we’re inside the hive all the time, but the guys who go outside bring some back and share,” it clops its hooves together, “But hey, that’s why 9999 wanted us to help you ponies, so that we you might grow to like us a bit.”

Ladle turns around and squishes 17070’s cheeks.

“If it helps, I think you’re cute.”

“Eeee!” 17070 puffs out its chest proudly. It can sense something love-like from Ladle, unfocused but persistent. Completely different from anything it’s ever gotten from infiltrators before. Maybe, if it spent enough time around her, it could be enough to feed it, “Can I help you with anything? I’m good at digging and carrying stuff.”

“We’re not doing kimchi, so I doubt I’m in the market for digging but I could always use somepony to set the table.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You know what a spoon and a bowl are? Sorry if I sound ignorant but I’d rather ask than assume.”

17070 points at the ladle with which Ladle is stirring the stew.

“Spoon is that thing, but small. And a bowl-” the hive mind hiccups but brings out the requested information, “Yeah, I know.”

“Good. There’s a box by the central table. Grab ten of each, pair them up, and spread the pairs on the table.”

17070 trots off and returns a short moment later. Ladle glances at the setting and goes:

“Huh,” even she can estimate that the pairs are perfectly equidistant from each other in such a way that they round the entire table, “I suppose I should have been a bit more specific. I’ll fix it later.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” she pats the drone again, “You did well. It’s just that the few ponies who will be having lunch here won’t want to spread around the *whole* thing and have to shout at each other.”

“Neat!” 17070 livens up, “Can I help you cook? Everything here smells weird but not bad weird,” it points to one from a line of small glass bottles on Ladle’s ‘utility stump’.

“Oof,” Ladle smirks, “Cooking isn’t exactly something one can just pick-oh what the hay, we’re in a camp in the middle of nowhere, not in my bistro in Stalliongrad. But you’ll have to just look first, because I need this ready in time for lunch.”

As she starts fiddling with the spices again, 17070 asks:

“So you ponies add all kinds of powders for taste? Can I try?”

“Not in the cauldron. Take that cup,” she nods sideways to a small metal container, “and try to mix a little bit of something, just use only the tiniest

bit of spice. As I said, my supply here is limited.”

17070 grabs the cup, examining it from all sides.

Looks mega useful. Too bad I'll have to return it or I could trade it for something totally AWESOME!

Next, it takes a quick look at the levels of spice in each glass jar. They're all definitely close to running out.

Can't waste her tasty dusts, so I gotta find my own.

It raises its nose into the air. Having no idea what flavors ponies like, the drone decides to sniff around for anything dust-like with a particularly vibrant scent.

Now...

What is the result of someone mixing flour with oxygen? Maybe when someone also adds fresh sawdust, charcoal dust, a pinch of salt, and then spits semi-acidic goo into a pot and kneads it into a green, acrid-smelling blob?

It's definitely 'spicy' but also far from edible, which 17070 learns when Ladle eventually sniffs the presented metal cup, her eyes cross, and she coughs.

“Ooookay, I have no idea what you put in there but I doubt it's edible for anything other than a dragon. Clearly, our tastes are too different to just wing it,” she shakes her head, “Throw it away and I'll show you a thing or two after lunch.”

“Okay,” 17070 nods. A non-fatal failure with a chance of success later? To a drone, that's not a failure at all.

With a smile, it shakes out the sticky blob into the still smoldering central fire pit.

Pop!

“Eep?!” at first 17070 leans back, weirded out by the sudden loud noise.

Pop pop pop pop!

17070 leans closer to examine the sizzling blob, switching between sniffing the cup and the goop.

With a flash, everything goes white.

Shake

“ ... ”

Shake shake

“ ... ”

Shake shake shake

“ ... ”

Gasping, 17070 opens its eyes. Swirling Ladle is standing over it, tears pooling in her eyes. The moment the drone starts breathing again, she carelessly pulls it into a bear hug.

It’s not love as such 17070 can feel from her, but it’s care, it’s warmth, and it’s nourishment is keeping the suddenly weak drone from falling unconscious again.

What... happened...?

She lets go after a short while and says-

“ ... ”

-or at least her mouth moves. 17070 furrows its nonexistent brows, shakes its head, and asks:

“...?”

Ladle's jaw drops.

"...?!" 17070 realizes it can't hear itself, Ladle, or anything else at all, and it paws at its ears.

That's bad. That's really bad. Damn damn damn damn! That's the crusher, no questions asked. Deaf drone, waste of love, dead drone. Or maybe the first one to go exploring a cave with spiky munchers so that no one useful gets hurt.

Its mouth wiggles as one fatal future after the other crosses its mind.

Why couldn't it be the hangy neck-snapper instead? That's at least quick...

Swirling Ladle taps on 17070's nose to get the drone's, who is visibly sliding deeper and deeper into desperate resignation, attention. Ears splayed back and head hung low, it looks upwards at Ladle and presents the metal cup hooked into its leg hole which now looks more like the barrel of a cartoon gun fired after a bullet got stuck in it.

And I broke a pony thingy...

Ladle lets 17070 go and waves her hoof dismissively. Unfortunately, with lines of communication broken, neither of them has any idea how to proceed. That is, until 36658 accompanied by Uproot arrive to see what the explosion was.

"36658, I can't hear anything! Look, I need you to take my stash and give it to High Score. It's in a hole under a tree-" 17070 transmits a location on the map of the forest, *"There are some really flat rocks there and this nice mare might let me keep the broken-"*

"Shush!" 36658 replies mentally, fully aware of what's going through the other drone's head right now, *"I'll tell High Score and we'll think of something, okay?"*

A short exchange between 36658, Uproot, and Ladle later, the master of the healing bark transmits the following, very simple message:

“Stay with Miss Ladle and gimme the cup, you lucky bugstard. I’ll hide it with the rest of your things which you WILL see again. We drones stick together, and if 1988 or other bigwigs have a problem with it, High Score will sort it out.”

“9999 is still just a drone!”

“Don’t doubt the awesomeness of the Shiny-bringer or I’ll tell on you and you won’t get a turn with the shiny. Oh, and have a goomy ling. It’ll help with the pain a bit.”

As 17070 chows down the presented agonyslayer(TM), Ladle grabs the drone, puts it on her back, and mouths something towards 36658.

“She said - just rest, watch, and learn,” says 36658 before leaving.

20100 has finally gathered the courage to wander into the pony camp. The drone took the entire morning to think about a way it could be helpful while exploring the surrounding forest for anything of use or to trade with little to no luck. There was no shortage of potentially useful twigs but *everyone* could just gather those which didn’t exactly increase their value, and while colorful leaves were pretty, they had little lasting value and were pretty common around here as well.

With no other option, 20100 finds itself in the center of the mostly empty camp, hiding under the main table and watching the legs of a chubby earth pony mare walking around who seemingly hasn’t noticed it yet. When she walks over to the table and 20100 hears clanking of metal above itself, it peeks out from its hiding place and says:

“Psst!”

The mare looks around, confused.

“Down here, miss pony.”

“Huh?” she smiles, “Oh, another one,” she reaches backwards, and a moment later 17070’s head peeks out, “Are you looking for a way to help like this guy?”

“Oh, hi!” 17070 waves at 20100, “I’m kinda deaf right now but this pony lady is mega nice, so don’t be afraid of her.”

“Okay, thanks! By the way, can I have your things after you-”

“Nah, 36658 called dibs already but promised it’ll try to have High Score ask 1988 to let me at least stay with the ponies instead of getting munched.”

“Whoah, neat! Good luck with that then.”

“You too with your shiny points.”

“Mhm! I’m 20100,” the drone nods vigorously in the real world, “Do you have anything that needs doing?”

She shakes her head and laughs.

“I already have my helper and I don’t think my poor heart could handle another injury today.”

“Awww,” 20100 pouts, “I really wanna get a turn with the shiny.”

“Huh, what shiny?”

“That thing!” 20100 points at the switched off bug zapper hanging on a beam propping the cloth roof over the central camp area, “It looks super awesome and only 9999 can turn it on!”

“A bug za- oh,” Ladle snickers, realizing that these weird bug ponies might have more in common with insects than previously thought, “I can turn it on for you for a while if you want,” she offers, unable to contain her curiosity about what would happen. She’s no sadist, but the idea of small buzzing ponies repeatedly bumping their noses into the electrified mesh around it is sort of... tempting.

To her surprise, though, 20100 shakes its head with vigor.

“No, thank you. I gotta earn it. Nothing good is free. Like, let’s say, a warrior says they’ll give you free ear scratches and instead they want to play surprise dodgegoop with you. It’s no fun when it’s a surprise and with warriors. They cheat and use rocks sometimes...” the drone rubs a deep gash in its side.

“Aww, you poor thing,” she scoops 20100 into a hug, making the drone squeak in surprise and the one on her hack smile victoriously.

“She’s so soft and squishy!”

“Yup!”

“Smells nice, too.”

“Yup! And you know what’s the best?”

“What?”

“She can make floaty shinies from water! Like when depth gribblers wait for their prey underwater but without all the tentacles and choking.”

“No...” 20100 breathes out in amazement.

“Look look look!”

17070 taps on Ladle’s back, points at a bucket filled with foamy water, then at 20100, and says in the shifting tone of someone unable to hear themselves:

“FlOatY sHiNiEs, pLeasE.”

Smirking to herself, Ladle obliges by scooping some soap water into her hooves and blowing bubbles 20100’s way.

“Teach me, teach me, teach m-!” 20100’s excited bouncing up and down stops as the drone controls itself, “Wait, no. Later. First, I need shiny

points.”

“Okay then,” Ladle shrugs, “I’m done with washing the dishes, so I’ll be at my place if you need anything.”

“Sure thing, miss Ladle,” 20100 nods.

As she leaves with 17070, 20100 examines the area and decides that the best method to figure out a way to gain shiny points would be to secure a vantage point. With the think-y step one done, 20100 goes for step two, which is climbing onto the central table. An opportunity is bound to present itself. It just need to be smart, observant, vigilant, other synonym-

“Hello!” says a voice from underneath it.

“Ah!” its head snaps towards the squeaky voice, “A me-sized pony!”

Talking to the drone is a unicorn colt with a dark grey coat sharply contrasting with his bright neon purple mane and eyes.

“You look so cool!” he says.

“It’s because of the roof thingy,” 20100 points upwards, “It gets a bit too hot otherwise.”

“I mean with the armor and fangs and all of that stuff,” the colt climbs up on one of the many stumps serving as chairs, “By the way, we’re not supposed to sit on the table.”

“Really? Sorry, I just wanted a good vantage point,” 20100 hops down on a free stump next to the colt.

“No problem. There’s almost nopony around right now anyway. If there was, I wouldn’t be allowed to talk to you.”

“Huh, why?”

“Mom says you’re scary.”

“We’re *not!*” pouts 20100, “I mean, 8622, 1988, and 9013 can be, but not us drones. We just dig stuff...”

“Why are you here anyway?”

“I’m supposed to look for a way to be helpful. That’s why I wanted a place from where I can see everything.”

“So you picked the table?”

“Yup.”

After a brief pause, the colt asks:

“Any luck?”

“Not yet, but I’m ready for anything,” 20100 smiles at its flawless thinking.

“So... you wanna see my drawings while you wait?”

“Sure!”

“Awesome!” he smiles, levitating a notepad out of a saddlebag on a belt around his chest, “Name’s Magic Lantern by the way.”

“20100. We go by rank numbers.”

“Wooooow, like the Royal Guards! I mean, they have names, ranks, *and* numbers but that’s because they’re awesome.”

“Well, we have ranks and numbers in one, so that means... that means...”
20100 furrows its brows. Plussing is hard and multiplussing even harder,
“We’re two thirds Royal Guard-level of awesome.”

“And you have the armor built-in already.”

“Whoah!” 20100 looks at its foreleg as if seeing it for the first time, “You’re smart! Brave too.”

That surprises the colt.

“How come?”

“I mean, a high-rank told you not to talk to us and you’re still here.”

“Ah. That’s fine,” Magic Lantern waves his hoof, “At worst, I’ll just get a talking to.”

“I see. It’s different for us. We’d get eaten.”

“Whoah! Scary,” he looks around, “I don’t wanna get you into trouble.”

“It’s fine. Told ya, I’m supposed to get to know you ponies.”

“That’s great then!” Lantern puts the hovering notepad on the table, “I’ve got some Royal Guard drawings, some Spidermare, I’m even working on a comic. I’ve got a lot of free time here.”

“That pony has eight legs, four metal ones on his back!”

“That’s doctor Octopus, one of Spidermare’s nemesises- neme- enemies. He makes scary monsters to fight Spidermare.”

“That’s one scary baddie! A bit flat, though.”

“Umm,” Lantern scratches his head, “I’ve got a way to go as far as drawing goes. This is how he looks in the comics,” he levitates out a smudged yet colorful comic book and presents it to 20100.

“Hmm... got anything to draw with?”

“Sure?” a pencil floats over to 20100 and the notepad flips pages until there’s an empty one.

The drone gets to work. When it’s done, Magic Lantern’s jaw drops.

“That’s... that’s exactly like the comic, just black and white. Shading too.”

“We’re good at copying stuff.”

“I can see that, but can you do this?” Lantern wiggles his eyebrows as he takes the notepad again and flips the pages until he reaches one particular section, “Now look closely.”

His telekinetic glimmer grabs a stack of pages, bends the corners, and then lets go.

“THE PICTURE PONY IS MOVING?!” 20100’s voice cracks and slips an octave higher, “Now I wish I could do magic too...”

“That’s not magic. Let me explain-”

“HIGH SCORE! HIGH SCORE!”

9999 wakes up. Its head is pounding but it’s not the knife-inserted-into-each-ear kind of pain like in the morning.

Any pressing issues?

No.

So why is everyone...

“High Score! High Score!” 13415 gently shakes the drone again.

It’s evening already and apparently every single drone is sitting in a circle around 9999.

“What’s going on?” it yawns.

“That guy gets a shiny!” as one, they point to 20100 nervously holding a sharpened stick burned on one end and a stack of wide leaves.

“Whuh?”

“THIS GUY!” 13415, holding 20100 from behind by its shoulders, shakes the other drone.

“And you... *all of you*... unanimously agreed to that,” comments 9999.

“It must still be sleepy and tired. We’re not anonymous, you know all of us! We’re your mates! We-” the objection gets interrupted by 9999 raising its foreleg and saying:

“Alright, why?”

“LOOK!” 13415 shoves 20100 forward, “Do the thing! Show High Score *the thiiiing!*”

The stack of leaves gets shoved under 9999’s nose, the top one showing what must be a simplified image of a changeling drone facing forward.

“I modeled for it!” 13415 beams, “It’s me waving!”

Then 20100 starts flipping...

...and as 9999’s jaw drops and eyes go wide, it immediately agrees with the collective decision.

The newly dubbed moving pictures ling *definitely* earned its turn with the shiny tomorrow.

Author's Notes:

Damn it!

Okay, so it's a 3-parter with 1988's return next time, but THEN it's back to the dreamscape, and finally we'll get to know what was the weird shockwave that saved both 156 and the warrior group.

1988, 9999: 7

As 1988 trips over a root and gets caught by 8622, it dawns on his hazy mind how exhausted he *really* is after following the pegasus security guard for so long, the mind manipulation, being watchful throughout the night without love, and flying mixed with walking back.

“We’re almost there,” says the warrior as 1988 steadies himself, “I’m shocked we haven’t been attacked by the monsters so far.”

“Please, don’t jinx it now. I’m hearing a lot of noise ahead and the last thing I need is for it to be the mass panic of a logging camp under attack,” 1988 rolls his eyes.

8622’s ears twitch.

“It *does* sound like wood repeatedly hitting rock, although there’s no screaming. Unusually loud voices, yes, but no panicked screaming.”

“Hmm, whatever that may be, let’s check up on our guys first.”

Circling around the camp, they reach the changeling site that’s strangely empty for this late in the evening. Usually, the drones would be mucking around, trading scraps or interesting things they found throughout the day, but right now there are only 3 Silents staring blankly their way, barely conscious 9013, and one drone sitting with its back to them and doing something to the warrior.

“We’re back,” announces 1988, “Where is everyone?”

The drone doesn’t react. 1988 and 8622 exchange glances, the infiltrator’s is slightly confused but the warrior is clearly ready to slap a disobedient subordinate.

They approach, still with zero reaction from the drone. Only when 1988 steps into the drone’s field of view, it looks up, its eyes go wide, and it

positively jumps into the air before taking a few steps backwards.

“OH, hi, 1988. GlaD yOu’rE bACk.”

“Glad to be back too, 17070,” replies the infiltrator, “Where’s everyone?”

“Uhh, uhh,” while changelings can’t physically sweat in their natural form, this drone is somehow getting close, “I, umm, I cAn totalLy hEar yOu juSt fiNe but 9999 kNowS eVerYthiNg and you reaLly wAnt tO talk to iT. I’ll... I’ll go gRab iT!”

17070 bolts away.

“Stop right there,” orders 1988, furrowing his brows. The drone *ignores* him, “HEY!”

Growling to himself, he extends his mental reach through the drone’s hive link to take grasp of its mind.

The drone *resists* him and vanishes out of sight, pumping its legs towards the pony camp.

“Should I go grab it?” asks 8622, “I might break only *one* leg for this kind of disobedience. Two max, if it keeps resisting afterwards.”

What the hole was 9999 doing here while we were gone?! Drones resisting orders and mental control?

I mean, I’m barely scraping by as far as love goes and the drone was full but-

Wait, the drone was FULL.

How?

“No,” 1988 shakes his head, “I’ll go see what’s going on once I’m done here.”

“...this is what happens when you don’t keep drones on a tight leash. They start to get... *ideas*...” mumbles 8622.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. To me it looked as if it was feeding 9013,” he puts his horn to the prone warrior’s head, “Now... we relink the hive connections and-” he keeps mumbling to himself as he frees 9013 from the mental burden and immediately feels the warrior fall asleep, “-done.”

“So, *now* we go find the drones and remind them a little how the *leadership structure* of the hive works?” 8622 raises an eyebrow.

1988 shakes his head.

“No. You stay here with the Silents and keep an eye on 9013. I’ll shroud myself and check out the camp.”

“I doubt you’re strong enough to go invisible.”

“*Shrouding* is a different thing. I couldn’t go invisible even at full power. Shrouding lets infiltrators avoid being sensed by other changelings or force them to ignore us if they’re distinctly lower as far as power level goes.”

“Neat trick. Good luck then, I’ll stay on guard.”

In the next instant, 1988 disappears from her vision without a trace.

In reality, though, 1988 is still there, completely visible to any non-changeling, and heads off to the camp only after his head stops spinning from the expenditure of his already extremely limited love.

The central bonfire is roaring, ponies are chatting and eating, and the overall atmosphere doesn’t betray anything nefarious to 1988’s eyes as he observes the milling ponies.

Drones in plain sight. Ponies are still wary of them but I’m not seeing any hostilities.

“Hey there, pretty, love-eating, bugpony lady,” says a familiar voice from a pile of logs to the right.

“I’m not- I- we don’t eat-” 1988 scowls at Hacksmith chuckling at the infiltrator’s stuttering.

His eyes. Slightly glassy but he doesn’t smell of alcohol, rather of changeling. He’s under the influence of changeling venom and he’s not the only one. Did the drones have to resort to biting them?

“Glad you’re back all right from your patrol. Any trouble with the monsters?” asks the earth pony.

“Thankfully, no. How did things go here?”

“Business as usual, mostly, although I did want to talk to you in private before... let’s say before I have a chat with Sawtooth.”

“What did they do this time?” 1988 rolls his eyes with absolute certainty. Knowing the feeding habits of changelings is already a huge risk to their safety.

“Actually, this one’s about you,” Hacksmith frowns at 1988’s reaction, “I know your culture is different but abuse is abuse.”

“What are you talking about?” 1988 narrows his eyes.

“You know the two bark-eating guys, right?” when 1988 nods, Hacksmith continues, “But do you know *why* they were eating bark?”

Even 1988 knows that the answer ‘because they are morons’ is the wrong one here.

“Not really.”

“Thought so,” Hacksmith nods, “They themselves didn’t know why the birch bark helped them dull the constant pain they were in. Granted, bark itself shouldn’t do that but I assume your ‘digestion’ is different.”

“They were hurt?”

“Hmph!” Hacksmith frowns, “They didn’t want to tell me either but it turned out they were *terrified* of anypony knowing and of them not being able to work at full capacity. Does something called ‘the crusher’ ring a bell? They mentioned it a lot.”

1988 nods. Of course he knows why they would feel that. However, that doesn’t please Hacksmith at all.

“Got nothing to say to that, really?” he asks.

1988 takes a deep breath, carefully weighing his words.

“There’s very little I can tell you. Please don’t take it as me being hostile or anything. There are reasons for why we treat each other the way we do.”

“I was afraid you’d say that but at least you’re not trying to lie to me. 1988, let me be completely frank here. We won’t tolerate anypony threatening the little guys. Work or die is barbarism of the worst degree, and I’m saying that as a *Stalliongrad* citizen.”

Apparently, they DID manage to gather love so we could spare some for repairs.

“Mister Hacksmith, as long as I’m in charge I have no intention of doing anything that would hurt us. I fully intend to keep everyone alive until 156 and 387 return, *if* they return. However, since they clearly shared our feeding habits with you, not starving has always been an issue for us, and the energy required for proper healing hasn’t always been... available.”

“If that’s a problem, you can keep the hurt guys with us. I talked with... crap, I can’t remember your numbers at all. The second top guy after 9999.”

“13415,” replies 1988 immediately.

“Yeah, that one. He- it said that they’re not getting worse, so clearly our interactions as they are now are enough.”

“As I said, I intend to return *everyone* into 156’s hooves,” says 1988 flatly.

“Look, the deaf guy was afraid you’d kill it straight up when you came back,” Hacksmith scowls, raising his voice and jabbing 1988 in the chest.

“Deaf? Oh... ooooooh...” 1988 blinks in realization, “Would that be 17070?”

“You’d have to ask Swirling Ladle but that number does sound familiar. She’s been spending the whole day with it and they’ve been getting along pretty well.”

“Interesting,” 1988 shakes his head, “Look, it seems to me that the drones have been useful and in no danger while I was gone. I have to talk to everyone and assess the situation before deciding on what to do next. I know you ponies can’t tell but we were in a *bad* shape, and I don’t mean physical scratches and bruises. So far, it seems we are recovering and the drones are being crucial to that. I’m not about to make things worse.”

“Glad to hear that. I’d hate to tell Sawtooth that we might have to protect a few of your drones from you.”

While that does sound like a threat, and it is, to an infiltrator it means one more important thing - the ponies *like* the drones, and that means food. The problem is that he can’t be sure which part of what Hacksmith is saying is his own will and which part is the changeling venom afflicting his mind.

“As long as I’m in charge, that won’t be necessary,” 1988 nods towards the pony festivities, “Now, please, let’s talk about something more pleasant - what’s the celebration today about?”

Hacksmith snickers.

“Nothing in particular. Just that the bark guy managed to make some painkillers and everypony took a dose to chill out a little, calls them ‘goomy lings’. We don’t have much beer here for celebrations and the painkillers can give you a bit of a high on top of dulling the muscle pain. Everypony’s gonna be sleeping well tonight, and trust me when I tell you that it’s been a while and it’s sorely needed.”

Huh, they knew what they were taking.

“So... everything is alright?”

“If you’re not about to hurt the drones as they’re so worried about, I think we’re okay. How about you have a bite and join us?” Hacksmith offers a goomy ling to 1988 who shakes his head.

“Not now, thanks. I think I’ll have a word with 9999 and see what to do next.”

“Then you should at least wait for the music number.”

“Music number?”

“Yeah!” Hacksmith pats 1988 on the back and gently guides him closer to the lively center of the camp where someone assembled a small podium while the two were talking, “Triangle used to be a music teacher,” he nods towards a unicorn talking to two eagerly listening drones, “But that’s not the best paid profession so he ended up here. It turns out, your guys are super good at copying music so he’s been teaching them a song today. He had some trouble translating notes into numbers but apparently he did it in the end. You can’t even begin to imagine how happy finding somepony as skilled made him. He even let... buck if I know which number drone he let use his guitar. You’ll see in a few moments. Wanna come cheer them up? It might mean a lot to them.”

“No, I’ll stay here and watch. If they’re worried about me coming back, I wouldn’t want to ruin their performance,” 1988 shakes his head.

“Suit yourself. I’ll go grab a bite. Ladle’s stew is delicious.”

As the earth pony walks away, 1988 turns his attention to the podium where two drones seem to be smacking each other over the head with sticks and yelling:

“ROCK MUSIC!”

“METAL MUSIC!”

“ROCK-”

“METAL-”

“ROCK! We’re smashing ROCKS against each other!”

“17070 let me use its cup just this once! WE HAVE METAL!”

“We have more rocks than metal!”

“Then we’re doing rock music with a hint of metal!”

Both drones stop waving sticks at each other and exchange thoughtful looks.

“Hey, that’s not bad!” they clop their hooves into a high one, all beef instantly forgotten.

13415 walks on stage, clearing its throat and visibly nervous as the ponies quieten down.

“So, umm,” it begins, “We kinda made up a song... I mean new words for a song that mister Triangle taught us. He said it needed a few more instruments, but we got some rocks-”

“You worry too much!” calls out the ex-teacher sitting at the table, “Just take a deep breath and go!”

From this far, 1988 can’t recognize which drone is the one who begins playing a slow tune on Triangle’s guitar. 9999 is sitting in front of the drone group, its back turned to the ponies. From the corner of his eye, 1988 spots 17070 on the back of an earth pony mare in the audience.

As the other drones join in by drumming on rocks and one on a broken metal cup, completely messing the surprisingly smooth guitar tune up by the flat noise, 13415 takes a long breath and starts singing:

Back home, we were so scared

now we’re away from the hive

*carrying, digging, that's who we were
and score was all that mattered.
Cave-ins, monsters we couldn't get away
life was hard, we didn't last long
too dumb for long words like marmalade
and score was all that mattered
Hope we sought and we're finding you
every day we learn something new
pretty leaves, ponies, morning dew
score's not all that matters
High ranks never care for what we say
never care for games we play
never care for how we do
never care for what we know
we're just drones, yeah, yeah...*

The guitar drone follows the words by a slow, haunting solo which makes 1988 think again about Hacksmith's concerns.

*High Score, you got us so far
we love you from all our hearts
only you can keep us alive
You don't know how much you matter.*

13415 steps down and pulls listening 9999 into a hug to the explosion of clapping and stomping from the listening ponies.

By the time the applause ends, 1988 is already gone, heading quickly back to the changeling camp.

“How did it go?” asks 8622.

“We’re assholes, 8622,” 1988 shakes his head, “And we’ve been like that for a very long time, no matter how necessary it was.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’re on watch tonight, you’re in the best shape out of all of us. I’ll see how the drones are overall and maybe we’ll manage to give you a small refill.”

“Understood.”

1988 smiles, knowing she’ll obey and not do anything to the drones without explicit orders.

Warriors. You gotta hate them and you gotta love them.

Connecting to 9999, 1988 says simply:

“When you’re done for tonight, I want to talk to you, just the two of us.”

To 1988’s surprise, 9999 arrives only a few minutes later. Logically, the drone shouldn’t have any reason to be on edge but 1988 can see the small signs and knows that 9999 knows what this is- what this *could* be about.

“I was half expecting you to run off like 17070,” says the infiltrator, sitting down on a bank at the edge of the changeling camp.

“17070 was just scared, and for a good reason,” replies 9999, taking place next to the infiltrator, “Doing its best to run away is still better than simply

getting crunched.”

“Since when do you drones refuse to return the love you got to the hive?” asks 1988 with curiosity more than hostility.

9999 grits its teeth.

“Maybe it has something to do with us having to fend for ourselves while you high ranks were away, while I thought my head would explode as I held the hive links together. Or maybe just with the fact that 17070 *earned* it on its own from that cook lady,” the drone reminds itself that just *talking* this way to a higher rank would get it immediately killed back home, “Sorry, I didn’t want to be mean but you started it and wanted to know the truth.

Still, seeing 1988 face it with bared fangs and hearing the low growl from his throat shows that a polite apology might not be enough.

“Listen here, you little goop! My superiors are gone, most of our knowledge is gone, unknown things from holes-know-where abducted changelings hundred times stronger than myself and they haven’t been heard of since, and then I come back after STOPPING a pony intent on telling others about us being here and I have a drone ignore me, more drones worshipping *you*, an unconscious warrior, and a pony basically telling me that if I lay a hoof on one of you guys I’ll get a first-hoof experience in what it means to be a logged tree. I’m *a little on edge* right now, so pick your next words carefully.”

9999 sighs.

Oh well, it’s all or nothing then.

“You haven’t figured out which drones are too badly hurt to remain alive so far, and I’m not going to tell you and have them eaten. You want to make an example of me away from the ponies? Go for it but it’ll still be one dead drone compared to way more. Song or not, I’m not special or important.”

9999 wasn’t expecting 1988 to slap it, especially hard enough to hear a crunch. It expected the fact that the crunch didn’t come from its head even

less.

Scowling, 1988 raises its foreleg cracked and badly bent at the fetlock and shoves it into 9999's face.

"Now do you understand how weak I am right now? 8622 isn't much stronger. A *drone* resisted my control attempt. *I. Need. All. Of. You.* Especially if you managed to refill on love while we were gone. Do you think I can send a standard warrior like 8622 to the camp and get *any* positive result? You connected with the ponies, only you can hurt the damn monsters. Even from a purely strategic standpoint, getting rid of even a single drone is dropping my own chances of survival. And... honestly... I feel a little hurt. We've saved each other before and you still think I'd do that?"

9999 looks into the infiltrator's eyes. He *sounds* genuine, but he's still an infiltrator - it's their job.

"I'm sorry. It's just... you can't know how life in the hive was for a drone. You just can't."

To the drone's surprise, 1988 shakes his head.

"9999, it was the same for everyone who wasn't in the top ten. The exact nature of the danger might have been different but we were all just expendable snacks for those above us."

"But you weren't *defenseless*! You could fight and maybe you would win and get something out of it but do you know what happened to the last group of drones who *successfully* defeated a warrior trying to eat them? The *entire* tunnel section they worked in was wiped. Can *you* be replaced just by pouring a little love into a reserve egg ready to hatch? Or by Silents? No. You might be a low ranked infiltrator but you still have value. We, in the eyes of everyone above us? We're recyclable tools in a world where recycling is easier than repair."

1988 has to concede this. He leans closer to flinching 9999's face and presses his forehead to the drone's, whispering:

“Look, I know words mean nothing, especially from the mouth of a changeling infiltrator, so think about it this way - patchwork repairs and surface plastering over deep wounds is only hurting us in the long run. You will either help me provide proper healing or you won’t tell me anything and we’ll suffer more and more drain on our energy reserves as the damage mounts. I left you in charge until I got back, so think of this as your final leadership decision.”

9999’s mind starts going in circles. If it decides wrong, everyone might die. If it doesn’t say anything, some of the drones *will* eventually get killed as the wounds get more serious.

This is *a real* decision. Not picking a drone based on imaginary points and what sounds like a good idea at the time.

This has meaning...

...and consequences.

The celebration is over.

“Psst!”

9999, strolling through the now empty pony camp, hears a hiss nearby. Everyone has gone to sleep and no drones have returned yet.

“Psst!”

“Yes?” it asks, looking at a pair of glowing teal eyes peeking from behind a pile of logs.

“So... can we go back?”

“Yes,” 9999 nods.

“No crunching?”

“None. 1988 promised.”

Three more heads stacked atop each other peek out.

“You sure?”

“17070 will have to remain deaf. We don’t have the love for such complex healing. The rest of you are to report all your injuries or anything unusual to 1988 tomorrow. He’ll give you a full check-up and surgery, all safely under 36658’s agonyslayers. I’ll be there holding your hoof if you want,” simultaneously speaking through the hive link to 17070.

“ThAnK yOuuu!” the deaf drone rams into 9999, clamping its forelegs around its neck, “I liKe tHe pOnies bUt You guyS aRe tHe beSt anD I dun wanNa Leave Youuu!”

“If we have the time and love, we’ll fix you too, 17070. Don’t worry,” 9999 replies in the only way the deaf drone can understand.

Mass, heavily emotional wibble!

“Don’t you try that on me, I’m one of you and that makes it illegal,” 9999 faces the synchronized wibbling from the circle of drones around it, “You go and thank 1988. He’s the one in charge who’s going against everything he learned in the hive.”

In the morning, 1988 yawns but finds himself unable to get up or even move his legs.

Am I too hungry? What’s going on?

The blackness covering his face shifts, revealing two teal eyes, a mouth, and a tongue that licks his face. The numerous black weights on his limbs and all over his body do the same but without the licking.

And afterwards, they all say as one:

“Thank you, 1988!”

“My... heart...”

Author's Notes:

Aaand the 3-parter is done!
Dreamscape plot next.

PS: Sorry for butchering Nothing Else Matters. Does anyone else think that, for such a positive love song, it *sounds* terribly sad?

156, 387: 8

They brought these accursed THINGS...

The Tantabus growls as it senses a group of four changeling drones get dragged into its world like the others before them, and their reality shifts into a dark, dank, roughly dug underground tunnel with one dead end and a cave-in on the other.

Claustrophobic, with almost nonexistent air flow, and deathly silent. Sane creatures never last more than a few hours in grim circumstances like-

“OH MY HOLES, IT’S TOTALLY LIKE BACK HOME!”

“AND NO HIGH RANKS IN SIGHT!”

“PLUS NO ORDERS!”

“WOOOOO, PARTYYYYYY!”

“DIGGY, DIGGY, DIGGY!”

“BONUS POINTS FOR THE FIRST SHINY!”

Of course, Tantabus can ‘see’ perfectly within the section of the dreamscape its focus is on, but in this instance, seeing does not immediately equal believing.

What...?

The creature of nightmares can only stare as the drones begin effortlessly dismantling the walls of the tunnel like termites inside a block of wood, forcing Tantabus to spend its focus to expand this particular segment of dreamscape reality.

You will NOT escape.

It learned its lesson last time and, instead of trying to scare the drones on its own, it reaches into the minds of the changelings to summon the worst horrors they're afraid of.

There is *plenty* to choose from.

“Aaah!” yelps 31214 as it suddenly breaks through a wall which previously felt like it would simply be a block of solid rock as far as its drone senses can reach, “This tunnel is weird!”

Yes... uncertainty, unfamiliarity. It all starts with ripping them out of their comfort zone.

“How weird?” asks 10013, peeking into the short hole 31214 has managed to dig so far.

“Sudden holes weird!” replies 31214.

“Any baddies?”

“Nothing so far.”

“Shinies?”

“Nope!”

“Awww...”

And with that, the drones all resume digging as 31214 starts throwing pebbles and gravel left behind by its digging into the newly open cavern.

How are they this calm again?! Their senses JUST failed them. No matter, even the most resilient minds can be broken with time and patience. No genius, no mental fortress, nothing can withstand nightmares beating against its defensive walls forever.

With Luna already in my grasp, there's nothing to save you.

“Hey, guys, there’s so much space in here!” 31214 calls out of the newfound cavern into which it tumbled after its examinatory method of ‘throwing rocks in there’ failed to yield any negative results, “Be careful, though, the hole’s near the ceiling!”

No. No escape, no space. The walls will close around you and you will see one of you get torn to shreds before your own eyes.

Hissing and screeching bursts out of the walls of the cavern as the ground trembles.

“Baddies! BADDIES!” 31214’s yelling shouldn’t be audible in the cacophony of noise, yet the other drones immediately react as one and push through the short tunnel like a changeling noodle. The Tantabus clearly doesn’t have enough experience with changelings to know about the hive links, “Melly gribblers down- AH?!”

31214’s flight path of dodging small flocks of ‘flying munchers’ turns into an uncontrolled fall as a spit of acid from the ceiling hits its wing.

“The ceiling toooooooooo-!” it spirals down towards the dozens of hungry mouths breaking through the seemingly solid ground and simply *waiting* for their prey.

10013, the first one in the stack of drones filling the entrance tunnel, jumps into the cavern without a word. A moment of confusion crosses Tantabus’ mind as it watches the drones behind it begin kicking the walls in sync seemingly without any orders.

The result reveals itself soon as a chunk of the cavern collapses inside, letting the drones peek out of the tunnel simultaneously. Tantabus can’t know it yet, not without properly absorbing the mind of someone with real knowledge of changelings, which these days would mean either Chrysalis herself or some of the top rank infiltrators, but 10013 immediately taps into the mind of 19441 who remained on lookout to be able to dodge the falling rocks which is much easier than the spitting creatures aiming at it.

“It’s raining gibblers, hole-lujah!” 10013 bolts downwards, its wings buzzing as quickly as they can, towards 31214 barely slowing down its drop with its one healthy wing. The ceiling monsters ripped out of their habitat by the artificial earthquake have other things on their mind than to attack the drones as well as the mouths on the bottom being fed a steady diet of rocks, “It’s raining gibbs- yeah, yeeeah! GOTCHA!”

Within a few more seconds, they’re all safely back inside the original tunnel as, with the help of the two returned drones, the remaining duo bury the entire cavern of horrors with a one final ‘boom!’ and everything goes silent barring the heavy breathing of changelings. What Tantabus doesn’t sense is the common knowledge running through the minds of all its victims - drones stick together.

No matter, they’re stuck here now. Let’s see how you deal with solid granite.

A small pulse passes through the drones’ surroundings which they acknowledge by freezing and their ears twitching, listening for any signs of danger. When no immediate threat presents itself, they relax again with the exception of 31214 who starts sniffing the ground.

“Umm, guys? The tunnel’s being weird again. The floor is made of big hard now.”

The drones perform several exploratory pokes all over the place.

“31214, how’s the wing?” asks 10013.

“Hmmm...” the wounded drone wobbles the dissolved remnants of its wing, “I think it’s okay as long as you don’t want me to fly. It doesn’t even really hurt anymore.”

“Really? That shouldn’t-” 10013 realizes something, “Everyone, how are you as far as the old love levels go?”

The drones pause before breaking into a general chorus of shrugging and “Been worse”.

“My point exactly. The four of us just collapsed a cavern and we’re not completely exhausted, and you two started with it on your own.”

“Huh...” general shrugging turns into vice-admiral confusion.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” asks 10013, wiggling its eyebrows at its mates.

“Why do we have the leg holes? I think it’s cup holders,” offers 19441.

“Yes- I mean *no!*” 10013 shakes its head, “Valid question but not the one I’m pondering right now.”

“Then I’m stumped.”

“We haven’t lost any love by doing what we just did!” 10013 exclaims with a wide smile, “That means we can break through big hard easily!”

“So... up?”

Tantabus can only stare as the small group of drones begins tunneling upwards as one at a low angle in which they can avoid sliding back down. If it currently had a corporeal form, its jaw would drop. It scans the minds of mortals for what’s commonly believed to be the hardest substance.

No. Just NO! Physics can go screw itself. Walls made of DIAMOND!

Another pulse passes through the ground, and 10013’s hoof hits something way too hard.

“...guys...” the leading drone breathes out a whisper, “...you won’t believe this...”

Yesss! You are stuck here, and now you will slowly descend into madness with only darkness as your companion and-

“THE WALL IS MADE OF SOLID SHINY! EVERYONE, COME GRAB SOME!”

Within a few moments, the diamond wall reflecting the teal bioluminescence of changeling eyes is filled with holes as all four drones get to digging their share of shiny.

NO, whatever you bug monsters are, I am the master here!

As 13887 jabs its hoof into the diamond wall and breaks off another chunk, the entire underground reality vanishes, leaving the drones floating in nothingness for a few seconds before they drop on the stone floor of what looks like a ruined throne room of an abandoned castle.

“Awww...” whines the drone as its foreleg hits only empty air.

A short while later, the dark, starry night visible through the partially crumbled ceiling coalesces into the galaxy-coated equine form of Tantabus who faces four drones blinged-out with enough diamonds in their leg holes to make any common treasure vault jealous.

“YOU!” booms the voice of Tantabus, “I WILL MAKE SURE YOU-”

“EEEEEEE, it’s a pony made of shinies!”

Tantabus finds its starry mane and legs being tugged and poked with no regard for evil monologue.

“YOU WILL FEAR-”

“Look look look! Imma pony!” 13887, hovering in the air next to Tantabus’ head, pokes its face through the flowing mane.

“ENOUGH!” roars Tantabus and a tendril of dark blue smoke breaks the floor and violently pulls the drone out of its mane and in front of its face, “You...” it bares its fangs.

“Hi! I’m 13887,” the drone tries to be friendly when faced with clearly overwhelming force.

“Heh, so *weak and pathetic*,” the tentacle tightens around 13887’s neck which, to Tantabus’ surprise, doesn’t result in begging and choking.

Yet...

“Hey, let 13887 go!” 10013 steps forward.

“Hmph, no.”

Crack!

The tentacle tosses the drone with a clearly broken neck towards the other three before vanishing.

Now feel in the knowledge that your life is insignificant-

“BOOO! THAT’S CHEATING!”

“AND 13887 WAS ONLY A WEEK FROM RETIREMENT!”

“We don’t have tires, dummy, we have legs.”

“Oh, right. 13887 was only a week away from the crusher!”

“Yeah, cheater!” 10013 points at Tantabus with a scowl.

“Why aren’t you running?” growls Tantabus, “I just killed one of you with barely a thought.”

“Well duh,” 19441 rolls its eyes, “*Anyone* can do that, and at least it was quick. I’ve seen infiltrators who made drones *eat* each other from hind legs up. Remember 112458 and 336585?” it looks towards the others who nod, gagging a little.

“And we’re not *completely* stupid,” adds 10013, “You just made the shiny tunnel vanish and all this appear,” it waves its hoof around, “If we run, you’re just gonna cheat again and make it so that we end up here.”

“Yeah, *cheaty cheater!*” 31214 points an accusatory hoof at Tantabus, “Can’t win fair and square so you gotta cheat.”

“Worse than warriors, really...” 10013 shakes its head in disappointment.

And that's it.

That *stupid little gesture*.

Tantabus' eye twitches as it advances on the drones, its galactic mane now showing an exploding supernova.

"I thought you'd be useful as points of entry into the real world but no..." the reality distorts around them as the castle begins disintegrating, "You are useless. Just *DIE!*"

"See? Just a cheaty cheater," 10013 sits down on its butt and crosses its forelegs on its chest.

"Mhm, totally," 31214 nods, sitting down next to the leader, "Cheaters never win in the end."

"Yup," 19441 takes its place on 10013's other side, "They get eaten by someone who actually does the work."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRGHHHHHHHHH!" Tantabus screams, its entire focus shifting to the three drones defiantly sitting in front of it.

You will die the most painful death your tiny minds can comprehend.

Then they stick their tongues out at it in perfect sync.

Tantabus' concentration shatters along with reality exploding as all the gathered power gets released in a massive shockwave resonating through the entirety of the dreamscape.

10013 opens its eyes, finding itself lying in pitch blackness pierced only by silvery lines on a familiar invisible floor.

"Huh? The hive mind gathering room?" it sits up, immediately noticing the other drones shaking their heads and blinking in surprise.

All the other drones.

“13887! You’re *alive!*” it scrambles onto all fours before pouncing at the previously killed drone.

“Omigosh, I AM!” 13887 blinks in surprise, “EEEEEEEEEE!” it squeezes the other three drones hugging it, “No starry spook can stop us!”

Whoooooom!

“What’s whooming?” the drones don’t stop hugging but their heads start turning around until they notice a swirly green oval hanging in the air nearby.

“Who’s up for exploring the glowy green whoomy?” asks 10013.

“I kinda like living but this place is boring,” 13887 shrugs, “Maybe it’s full of green shinies.”

All the drones grin and that’s all they need.

“On three?”

“Can I count to that on my hooves?”

“Yeah, it’s after two.”

“Ooooh, that one.”

“No, not one. Two.”

“I’m confused.”

“On GO, okay?” 10013 corrects itself. There’s no way to tell what each drone knows with no connection to the hive mind.

“What number’s tha- ow!” 19441 gets smacked over its head, “I was just joking, grumpy.”

The portal swallows them all.

The next thing they hear is an excited:

“Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!” coming from 47989.

“Huh, you’re all alive,” adds smirking 387 thoughtfully.

The four drones ignore the warrior and immediately dogpile 47989.

“You’re okay!”

“You can talk again!”

“You won’t believe it, we were in a tunnel made of shinies! Wait... where did it all go?” 31214 starts examining its now empty leg holes.

“Drones, report!” orders a firm voice of 156, stopping the reunion and making the drones look around.

They’re in a forest clearing covered by a shimmering green dome. It’s quiet, the wind is whispering in the canopies, and it looks like everyone who got snatched during the nighttime ambush is here.

Seeing no immediate threat, 10013 recounts what happened to them, ending with:

“-and then we all jumped into the green whoomy,” it salutes.

156’s silent glaring is unnerving but 387’s chuckle encourages the drones.

“Well, 156, it looks like you owe these guys your life, and same goes for our other warriors,” 387 smirks at 559 who salutes back at 10013 and says:

“Thank you for your service, drones. Without you distracting the enemy we wouldn’t be in a position to take 387’s portal here.”

“156?” 387 winks at the still stunned infiltrator, “Got anything to say, maybe?”

“I-” she stutters, “Well done, drones. Very well done,” she reaches towards 10013 who flinches but relaxes when she simply pats its head, “I... owe you- stop snickering, 387!”

“I wasn’t,” replies the warrior with his hoof still over his mouth.

“Ass.”

“Aaah, and we’re back to normal,” 387 relaxes and looks first at the group of warriors and then at the drones, “I suppose now’s the best time for questions if you have any. No? Good-”

“387, where are we?” asks 559 politely.

“Why am I alive again?” asks 13887.

“Why aren’t we hungry?” 10013 joins in.

“Why didn’t the drones believe in their reality like I did, you know-it-all?” 156 raises an eyebrow.

“Hmph,” 387 frowns, “Alright then, I’ll tell you what little I know and what I think happened.”

He pauses to summarize things in his head before continuing:

“I’ll give you the short version. We’re in the dreamscape, a dimension connecting the unconscious minds of creatures. The creature you faced is the Tantabus. I don’t know what its precise identity is but it’s somehow connected to princess Luna,” he faces the blank stares of the drones, “A pony princess responsible for protecting dreaming creatures. This is a safe zone I created so that the Tantabus doesn’t find us as easily. Now that you’re all here, though, I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to hide us.”

387 realizes, looking at the changeling audience sitting in a half-circle in front of him, that none of them have much of a clue what he’s talking about.

“Look, guys, explaining this to you without the hive mind knowledge at hoof would be a pain and likely pointless. 156 can share some info through

her hive link but even that wouldn't be enough so you'll have to do with the simplified version which is that we're in a different, very dangerous world with different rules than ours, okay?" as they all nod, 387 breathes out in relief.

"Now, all the other questions have a similar answer, I think. This is the realm of the mind, not the body, and to me it seems that the Tantabus isn't used to the changeling minds which gives us some advantages over it. Why? Tantabus is connected to Luna, as I said, and during the times when ponies last knew about us, Luna was... away. Drones are much less individual than us high ranks so trying to manipulate their singular minds without the knowledge of the shared hive mind doesn't work that well. It's like... it's like telling lies to multiple creatures who can instantly compare the versions they've been told and find inconsistencies. That's why we-you, fully developed lings, are easier to fool. Plus... think whatever you want but drones are way more used to threats and death than us warriors."

"Hmph," 791 huffs.

"Just trust me on this," 387 shoots him a glare, "Anyway, I digress. Since this is the realm of the mind, I think Tantabus couldn't erase 13887 from the minds of the others involved and when your reality exploded, your unreal bodies withdrew back into the hive mind which is, in principle, very similar to the dreamscape. So similar, in fact, that if we had several top rank infiltrators with us we could likely shape it and fight back directly. As for the love thing, I think that since we're not really exerting any pressure against actual *reality*, we're not burning extra love by doing things because we're sort of just... dreaming or thinking about doing them while our bodies exist in something close to hibernation."

"So our bodies are somewhere else?" asks 156.

"No... no no no," 387 shakes his head, "You must understand that all this is at best... educated guesswork? Yeah. The only expert who could give us real answers is Luna. I've been here before but only in the usual way, not by getting sucked in from reality by dreamweavers."

“You know what? Fine,” 156 rolls her eyes, “What are the facts then? We have a lot of love at our disposal, right?”

“No, we have the same amount we had before being abducted. We’re just not *losing* love by doing normal stuff. So no, we can’t perform some crazy invulnerable transformations. Buuut, we still have the advantage of Tantabus not knowing how we work.”

“Okay, so how does this help us get out?” asks 156, “We’re all here together now so that’s our main goal.”

“I’ve been thinking about it and I’m not sure what the Tantabus wants-”

“Oooh! Ooooh!” 19441’s raised foreleg interrupts 387, “We do! We do!”

“Uhh, what?”

“That Trombonus thingy said it wanted to get into the real world through us but then it got angry and said mean things and decided to kill us instead,” 19441 beams, “Cheating meanie.”

“I see...” 387 rubs his chin, “So we *are* the reason for the state of the dreamscape and the incursions into the real world. Well, not *us* per se but the fear we induced by attacking Canterlot,” his tone turns thoughtful and more as if he’s talking to himself, “Luna will be protecting ponies but not us for the same reason Tantabus can’t get to us as easily which means that despite its temporary loss of self-control it *needs* us to get out. That gives us a chance but not if we prove too problematic. We need to be *tasty*.”

“Does Totalus like mint? I can make minty goop,” offers 47989.

“I doubt it,” 387’s head snaps towards the drone as if completely forgetting that he wasn’t alone here, “You know what? I’ll think about what to do. You just use this time to rest.”

“Can I help?” asks 156.

“If you can figure out a way to avoid losing yourself in a reality Tantabus will conjure up and teach it to the warriors, that would be a great start. We

have to fight back but in a way that doesn't make Tantabus think it would be less hassle to just kill us."

"Which means...?"

"Which means we have to play its games and win just like the drones did."

"We won something?" asks 10013.

"Was it a shiny?"

"We had a lot of shinies but they all disappeared."

"I kinda liked the shiny tunnel."

"My wing's back!"

"Woooooow, that's so cool!"

"You came back from the dead."

"Oh, right... do I get a shiny?"

"Me too! I totally saved 31214."

"Me too! I gave 156 a hug and it made her less angry."

"Guys, guys, guys, listen to me! 47989 has high-rank calming hugs."

"OH MY GOOOSH! We don't gotta play dodgegoop with rocks anymore?"

"Okay, shinies for everyone, right?"

156 and 387, faced with five drones giving them eager stares, exchange glances and sigh.

Author's Notes:

Shockwave that saved everyone explained.
Dreamscape groups reunited.
Time to launch a counterattack.

Anyway, got a comment recently that the fragmented nature of the 5 ongoing storylines is problematic. I can definitely see that, especially when Chrysalis, 156/387, 1988/9999 are happening 2+ weeks after the invasion while 1313 and 65536 are going on right after the invasion. Is it really that confusing? (I can't really change it anyway but if it's that bad, it's a scheme I'd rather not use in any other story.)

CH: 6/13 - Mandible

Chrysalis removes her disguise, the green flash making both 68 and 96 transformed into earth ponies pulling a cart with her and their supplies glance backwards. She doesn't bother with explaining anything. After all, she's the queen. Queen with growing appreciation for her subjects, but still the queen. They've finally reached the barely inhabited forests stretching from Manehattan all the way to Appleloosa so the chances of them being spotted are miniscule and diving into memories has proven to be easier if she's in her real form. Still, just in case of supremely bad luck, she hides under the tarp covering the cart's contents.

As her mind vanishes from their hive links, 96 and 68 understand that their queen is going for another dive into her memories and doesn't want them to be affected by anything that might try to crawl out.

No reason to waste time. Thanks to Venom, I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Chrysalis skips the hive mind waiting room and finds herself hovering above a scorched pony village. She quickly finds her link to the memory - a changeling infiltrator disguised as a Royal Guard in a small group of heavily armed ponies led by a paladin and a pony who, despite her being almost completely covered in a *visibly heavy* full plate armor, can't be anyone other than Celestia because, you know, size, horn, wings, and a huge halberd floating next to her.

Celestia takes her helmet off, revealing her flowing rainbow mane cut short and a devastated look on her face. Unlike the princess, with Chrysalis' experience from the ruthless life in the hive, the scene of a massacre underneath her doesn't faze the queen in the slightest. Ponies impaled on spikes are lining the road ahead, more are hanging on nooses from the occasional still standing two-story building, and the stomped ground is red with blood. Too much blood spread too evenly, notes Chrysalis, as if someone systematically tried to create a horrifying scene rather than simply wiping out a pony village.

This wasn't done in hate, this was for show.

“Your Highness, please, wait here-” says the paladin walking by Celestia’s side. A familiar paladin, actually. Last time Chrysalis saw him, he’d just had his mind shattered by *Scream*.

Holy Shi- wait, no. Holy Storm, that was it.

Their armor barely changed over the years... how far in the past am I? Timekeeping has never been our strong suit. Weird for a species with a perfect internal clock and shared memory.

“Holy Storm, I always appreciate your concern, but I’ve seen more than your whole order combined since its inception,” Celestia cracks a grim smile, “Scorched earth tactic is nothing new to me.”

“I was walking about what the monsters did *before* the scorching, Your Highness.”

“What did your scanning spells detect?”

“They weren’t all killed, most were tortured as well. A few are still alive in agony but beyond saving.”

“You know what to do.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Holy Storm levitates up his solar symbol, the clouds above scatter, and numerous beams of light strike multiple places of the village including several of the impaled ponies nearby who turn to ash in an instant, “Done. Barring us, the scanning spells show there’s only one living creature in the village now a short distance ahead.”

“The town square,” Celestia nods, “If I were to leave a messenger, they would be there.”

It doesn’t take long for the scouting party to reach their destination, during which Chrysalis can only roll her eyes at the pure *theatre* of atrocities unfolding ahead. Flayed ponies, buildings covered in blood from butchered corpses on roofs, more and more *spectacle*. A brutal spectacle but still one

nonetheless. She can't stop herself from facehoofing at the sight of intestines and strips of skin hanging from anything even remotely vertical in the square.

This is just getting silly.

Based on the wetness of Celestia's eyes, the pony princess disagrees with Chrysalis' feelings about the absolutely over-the-top gruesome picture of brutality. What the queen wasn't expecting is a sad sigh from the alicorn's lips as she sees the solitary changeling sitting under a scorched wooden cross with few remains of a crucified pony hanging on it. Judging by the burn marks, it was one of the still living victims before being killed instantly by Holy Storm's village-wide spell.

The guards prime their weapons as the group approaches the creature who is about as threatening as a cupcake with a sad face drawn on in frosting.

"A changeling..." one spits on the ground.

"Your Highness, be careful," the paladin grandmaster steps ahead of the alicorn, "Who knows what it can do-"

"It's just a drone, Holy Storm," Celestia picks up the pace and soon she towers over the comparatively tiny creature who stands up and looks up at Celestia with a blank expression, "So, what does your queen have to say to me?" she looks around with a sigh, "As if I couldn't tell already."

In a completely flat tone, the drone cites the message left in its head:

"If ponies encroach further on changeling territory, every single settlement will end up like this one. We have no desire to harm the ponies who live here but we need them to survive. If you intend to take our means of sustaining ourselves away and starve us, we will make sure every single pony curses your name in agony as they die knowing who pushed us this far."

"How dare you-" growls Holy Storm.

“Calm down,” Celestia shakes her head, “The drone is just relaying a message left inside its mind.”

She knows how we work? How?

The drone just lowers her head in resignation as Celestia telekinetically levitates it up to her face.

“Little one, I’m aware your... superiors left you here to get killed by us but that is not necessary. Do you want to come with us or would you like to return home? I can promise you fair treatment,” in a low tone she adds, “At least more fair than your queen.”

The drone looks up, blinking in surprise:

“Really?”

“Yes, I mean it,” Celestia nods.

“I- I don’t know much about you ponies so I’d like to return-”

Chrysalis feels the drone’s mind get swallowed by pure rage within an instant, like a tsunami crushing a coastal village. Whatever little love the drone has left flares up to enhance its physical abilities, its foreleg transforms into a spike, and all its strength focuses on one goal which is to ram the limb into Celestia’s eye socket.

With a flash of golden light, a beam of magic from Holy Storm’s solar talisman hacks the drone in half before it can reach. Celestia only shoots him a glance as she presses the gurgling drone’s remaining half against her chestplate.

“I’m so sorry, little one. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me,” she gives its head a soft stroke.

Using the final shred of its strength, the drone stretches its neck to nuzzle Celestia’s but dies before its nose can even touch the armor.

“What do we do, Your Highness?” asks Holy Storm once Celestia lowers the drone’s remains onto the ground.

“Shimmerville is only ten hours ahead,” is all she says.

“Do we risk the same thing that happened here happening to them?”

“What the changelings are doing is more dangerous to them in the long run than to us.”

Shimmerville is the same but clearly without the methodical approach to sparking terror.

“This happened recently,” says Holy Storm, scanning the corpses, “No doubt as a response to us pressing on.”

“I had to be sure,” Celestia frowns in grim determination, “Let’s head to the town square.”

Like before, a solitary drone is sitting at the scene of carnage. This time, though, Celestia stops the group from approaching.

“Can you hear me, little one?” she calls out to the drone from a distance. As the changeling raises its head, she adds, “You can tell your leaders that we will leave you alone. We understand *why* this was done and-”

The drone screeches and, with its love burning like green flame around its body, charges.

“Why force it to attack...?” Celestia whispers.

Holy Storm’s talisman lights up but she shakes her head.

“No, this is my fault. I can at least make it painless.”

A simple flash of light from her horn later the drone is completely gone in a puff of smoke, the ground around it turned to glass.

This wasn't just a deterrent, the state of the village would have been sufficient. This was meant to force Celestia to kill innocents or have them killed before her.

"Send the pegasi out to scout the surrounding villages. If they're untouched, we're going home."

Several hours later, the pegasi scouts return to the party's camp north of Shimmerville and consolidate their reports:

"Your Highness, the villages are okay. There are feeding cocoons scattered all over the place but it looked as if the ponies were going about their evening rather than simply being herded. We got spotted by changeling patrols but they didn't pursue us."

"Understood," Celestia lowers her head in both defeat and relief, "If the only threat to them is a military operation from our side then we have no choice. Pack up, we're leaving."

Chrysalis lands in the village square.

It's sad to see Celestia treat changelings better than we did.

Than we do...

"CHRYSAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIS!" a roar of pure rage shakes the ground and the following earthquake shatters the few still remaining glass windows around.

"Took your sweet time," mutters Chrysalis, looking around but seeing no one, "Now where-?"

A broad, towering figure bursts out of the ground behind her, grabs her tail in one motion, and flings Chrysalis against the wall of the town hall. A quick love enhancement of her carapace later to avoid getting splattered all over the wall, Chrysalis gathers herself from the ground and dusts herself

off after flying like a cannonball *through all the town hall walls* and landing in a pile of garbage.

So much for talking. Damn warriors...

The ground explodes again, but taking Chrysalis by surprise twice using the same attack succeeds only in making Chrysalis fly upwards while feeling somewhat insulted at the assumption that it would work.

Queen Mandible.

That's all Chrysalis can gather from tapping into her hive link before her own mind gets scorched by the berserker rage boiling through Mandible's entire being.

"DON'T INSULT ME!" screams Mandible, jumping into the air with the speed of a rocket. Thankfully, changeling wings are excellent for maneuvering so Chrysalis avoids the mad charge with ease.

"I have to get rid of you but I really want to talk first," Chrysalis gives diplomacy a shot with expected results.

"I HATE YOU! I HATE ALL OF YOU!" screams Mandible after landing.

"Why?" Chrysalis raises an eyebrow, feeling safe in the knowledge that she's way more agile in the air than Mandible.

"I BUILT THIS! MY DAUGHTER MADE US GROW! AND YOU KILLED HER! YOU RUINED OUR RACE! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!"

"I've never met you," Chrysalis calls out, "And if it helps, Venom might be the first queen I actually respect."

"DON'T COMPARE US TO YOU!" Mandible rips a signpost out of the ground and spits on its end, shaping the goo into a spike, "WE WERE NOTHING LIKE YOU MONSTERS!"

The makeshift spear blurs and Chrysalis gets shot down from the sky by the piece of wood burning from friction which she couldn't even see.

Wha-?

Mandible is already on her just as she gets back to all fours, staring in disbelief at the long pole protruding from her chest.

The punch is the final drop which makes Chrysalis understand the real difference between warrior and infiltrator queens. She can't even track her surroundings as she flies *through* another building with barely any resistance. The best she can do on pure instinct is shut off her pain receptors completely to have the barest fighting chance.

Chrysalis' advantage over Mandible lies in her mental abilities but she can't affect the furious queen at all. Attempting to control her is like trying to pull something out of a pool of molten lava while hanging over it on a hemp rope that's already on fire.

Chrysalis stops time. She's not able to move but without the distraction of her brutalized body she can at least think.

She's lying on the street at the end of a line of holes her armored body made as she skipped like a rock thrown across a lake. She has a spike in her chest. Thankfully, warrior venom can do nothing to her so the main problem is just her being impaled by a piece of wood reinforced with goo. Mandible is already halfway towards her, charging like a raging bull with unavoidable murder in her eyes. Unfortunately, unlike what common combat knowledge states, furious Mandible isn't less accurate, she isn't less agile, and even if it was possible that she'd make a combat mistake it would be long after Chrysalis has been reduced to paste. In Mandible's case, the fury only means that whatever little empathy she might have had is gone and any hesitancy is replaced by pure warrior instincts.

The last warrior queen, the strongest one, the one who hits like a fully loaded cargo train barrelling down a mountain.

Damn it. Stumbling upon a warrior immune to mind control really does put certain infiltrator... inadequacies into the spotlight.

Okay, so I can't win a direct fight. An unpleasant situation but hardly a unique one. Pros - we're inside MY head. Cons - that doesn't seem to mean much at the moment.

Hmmm...

We're still inside my body, though, and while I might not be able to control her, I'd be a pretty bad excuse for an infiltrator queen if I couldn't control myself.

Time restarts.

With a burst of green flames, Chrysalis jumps up on all fours, incinerating the piece of wood inside. Mandible's following strike is *significantly* weaker than before, which means Chrysalis doesn't fly away like a punted golf ball this time, but only grunts as she blocks it and her entire body creaks.

As Mandible primes her foreleg for another blow, Chrysalis grows a spike from her hoof and rams it through the warrior queen's neck.

The chitinous spike catches fire along with Chrysalis' mane splattered by the completely non-metaphorically magmatic blood. In the next instant, the horrific wound she caused to Mandible gets cauterized from the inside and the pierced carapace regrows.

Ooookay... just a little longer.

Chrysalis dodges the next swing.

And the next one.

And one more before Mandible stumbles and collapses on the ground, able only to growl and shoot furious glares at the infiltrator queen.

“We’re inside your memory but you’re inside my body and, unlike the infiltrator queens I fought before you, you have next to no control over my *love reserves* unless you’re distracting me by effortlessly tying me legs behind my back and dribbling with me like with a basketball. I freely admit that if we were fighting in the real world, you’d run over me without even slowing down. Buuut, to be completely accurate, it’s not as if I would be stupid enough to fight you head on if I didn’t have to.”

“You... are all... pure evil!” growls Mandible.

“Aaand I’ve just about had enough. Do you even realize how much of my love you burned before I stopped you? I AM going to feel it when I wake up and I AM going to have to organize a damn wildlife ORGY to recover! I’m taking what I want and you’re not stopping me.”

Chrysalis’ horn flashes and this time the walls of Mandible’s mind shatter.

“I’ll make this quick - a changeling king. Does that ring a bell?”

“No.”

“Next - do you know anything about Scream?”

“This... this entire massacre was her idea,” growls Mandible, “She said that the pony ruler was soft, that she wouldn’t attack if we threatened her by killing *our* ponies.”

Chrysalis looks around.

This wasn’t just a threat. If it was, the ponies wouldn’t have been tortured before dying. This was Scream’s personal vendetta masquerading as strategy and she WANTED Celestia to see it.

“I doubt you’ll believe me but after meeting your daughter, I think I understand why you’re so angry. But it can’t just be *your* hatred for what the hive mind revenants did to Venom through Hiss that’s been poisoning our minds for centuries, because your rage *makes sense*. The overwhelming

hatred coursing through all of us *does not*. What is waiting for me in the hive memories?”

“Insane, worthless queens like you! Queens who would rule from a throne on a pile of changeling corpses. Queens who only think about themselves- ”

“Alright, I think you don’t have much more to say. Disappear.”

Frothing Mandible disintegrates along with the memory, leaving Chrysalis in the darkness of the hive mind alone.

“Can’t say I disagree, though,” she adds.

She closes her eyes.

“*HELP ME!*”

Chrysalis bolts upright in the real world and untangles herself from the tarp covering the cart.

It’s pitch dark, she’s gasping for breath, and as expected she’s *exhausted*. None of that, though, is on her mind right now.

That familiar voice.

It was her daughter, it was a memory from when changelings were leaving the hive to attack Canterlot. At the time, Chrysalis dismissed the cry for help with the usual thought - if her daughter wasn’t strong enough, she may as well get eaten during the usual high rank struggle for power. After all, she was a *warrior* and thus unfit for eventual leadership.

However, Mandible and Venom made it work. They made it work to create the most successful changeling era in history, albeit short-lived.

Her daughter didn’t even make it to Canterlot, that much Chrysalis already knew, but for the first time, possibly in her life, she *cares*.

“Too bad it’s too late for you...” she sighs, “But maybe it’s not too late for us.”

Author's Notes:

So, another step back through time into an era when changelings fought for every little scrap of ground they could get. Hilariously over the top violent, so next up is Canterlot cuddlebug again.

So, have I hammered the point that Scream is evil deep enough?

No? BRRRRRING OUT THE BIG Mallet!

Anyway, I decided to add some references to relevant stories about Scream's involvement in current events here just in case (gotta plug the less known stuff somewhere 🌈:rainbowlaugh:):

Imbalanced.

Dawn of the Silver Sun.

Halls of the Changeling King.

65536: 11

It's been several days since Luna's disappearance but, as always, there are still two Nightguards stationed by the ornate door of her castle suite. As one, both of them lock their eyes on the Royal Guard unicorn approaching them with a stern frown, his horn glowing as he telekinetically pulls out a scroll sealed with a golden seal. Stopping in front of the two bat ponies, he pulls off the band with the seal and unrolls the scroll.

"This is a search warrant for princess Luna's quarters," he says firmly.

Pink Sunset, the senior Nightguard of the two, grabs the scroll and starts reading. As his bright pink eyes, in addition to his pink mane and tail completely unsuited for nighttime operations, slide across the paper, his lips decorated with a touch of pink lipstick purse into a frown.

"You can't be serious..." his effeminate build and slightly high-pitched voice contrast sharply with the incredulity in his voice.

"The seal on the warrant says otherwise," the Royal Guard can't help cracking a smirk, "Now step aside."

Pink Sunset does quite the opposite, taking his place directly in front of the door.

"The allegations in this are absolute nonsense."

"Take it up with the council of nobles. I was tasked with searching princess Luna's quarters and that's what I'm going to do."

"Sir?" asks the second Nightguard on watch.

"The power-hungry, brain-damaged, racist--"

"Choose your words very carefully, *bat*, because no matter what I find, I *will* be writing a full report to the council."

Pink Sunset takes a deep breath.

“The council went behind princess Celestia’s back and ordered the search, citing ‘concerns’ about mom’s- princess Luna’s absence during the defense of Canterlot against changelings and the fact that the scanning spells newly put in place seem to be detecting irregularities inside the castle which *might* be a sign of changeling presence. They presume princess Celestia wouldn’t be impartial in the case of princess Luna *harboring or even being a changeling* in the first place, so they arranged a vote to search ‘the castle’ again and, of course, the first place their,” he gives the Royal Guard in front of him a look of utter disgust, “*stooge* came to examine is princess Luna’s suite.”

“It is the one place outside of the vaults and princess Celestia’s suite which the experimental spells can’t penetrate and *secure*,” says the Royal Guard calmly, knowing that Pink Sunset can get as angry as he wants but the council order is lawful and valid.

“Yes, I *would* believe that you running straight here with the ink still wet on this piece of drivel would have anything to do with actual concern for the law if those unicorn morons haven’t tried to make Luna responsible for anything from broken dishes to a weak harvest season during the past two years since her return. Bat ponies too, for that matter. Frankly, I thought ‘thieving guano rats’ was the official Royal Guard term for us during my first year after Nightguard reconstruction, *pinhead*.”

“Looks like a little filly, sputters like one,” the Royal Guard sneers, “I bet your coltfriend likes the dirty talk and I’m sure your cellmates will appreciate those full lips if you keep resisting a *signed search warrant*. Perhaps the Nightguard orientation training should include less pole dancing and more *law lessons*. Now get out of the way before I call in a squad to school you.”

“No,” says Pink Sunset.

“Inmate Pink Pussy-”

“How would you feel as a pile of ash?”

“Are you *threatening an officer of the guard on duty?!?*”

“No, *sir*,” Pink Sunset smirks, “I’m saving your life. Your little piece of paper wouldn’t protect you if you entered princess Luna’s quarters without the proper company, and her magic isn’t... merciful. I’ll go grab the Commander. He’s the only one who can enter in the princess’ absence without suffering *consequences*,” he almost presses his nose to the Royal Guard’s and growls, “And trust me when I say that the only reason I didn’t let you just waltz in already and later laugh in your widow’s face during the burial of whatever little would be left of you is that, unlike you, I might be a bit pink but I’m not a *cunt*.”

Shoving the Royal Guard aside, Pink Sunset strides off, his tail swishing in temporary victory from side to side.

Sharp Biscuit breathes out a sigh of relief as he rounds the corner, following Pink Sunset, and sees the Royal Guard simply standing by the window opposite Luna’s door.

“Good job, Pink,” he whispers.

“No problem, Commander.”

As they approach, Sharp salutes to the Royal Guard who raises the warrant and nods his head:

“Pink Sunset told me everything. Give me a moment to make sure it’s safe to enter,” he says politely before entering the suite and quickly closing the door behind himself.

Now, entering Luna’s suite without her in there would indeed be dangerous but it would be downright insulting to think that the best magic user in the world wouldn’t be able to set up protective spells able to filter out intruders on their own. Thankfully, superstitions about Luna had two sides and this time the ‘evil witch’ one worked in Sharp’s favor or, more accurately, 65536’s favor.

“Hi, Sh-” the changeling who was reading a book in the corner in the direct sunlight under the window opens its mouth to greet him and immediately gets shushed.

“Shh, we’ve got a problem.”

“Oh no!” mouths 65536 silently.

“A Royal Guard needs to search the suite and if he finds you, you’re screwed and Luna is in deep trouble too,” whispers Sharp quickly, “Hide the books and everything, *now*.”

65536’s eyes go wide. However, it doesn’t panic, it doesn’t freak out, it doesn’t fold under pressure.

In dangerous and pressing situations, drones obey orders.

Almost automatically, 65536 methodically rushes around, returning the open books on shelves and hiding its cot under Luna’s bed along with Not-Blue stained green from it drooling in its sleep.

It takes a few moments during which Sharp tries to think of a hiding place which would survive a magical search but can’t think of anything. One way would be to have 65536 leave through the window but that would almost certainly get it spotted by one of the many patrols flying around or stationed on the roof.

“Got any *really* good hiding place, and I mean one that’s straight up impossible to find? Or maybe a way out of here or something?”

65536 looks nervously at the pony-sized mirror on the wall. Princess Sunbutt said not to tell anyone...

“That mirror goes all wibbly and leads out of here but I can’t use it.”

“Then how do you know?”

“I can’t tell you, sorry,” 65536’s ears droop.

“65536, this isn’t the time for games!”

“It’s not a game!” the drone frowns, tearing up, “I can’t tell *anyone*, I promised.”

Sharp grits his teeth.

“Damn it...”

The door behind him clicks. Sharp turns his head in horror.

“Eep!”

Whoosh!

“I’ve had enough of these-” the Royal Guard steps inside, his horn glowing, “*obstructions*. You’re lucky I don’t have you locked up right- what’s that?”

Sharp, his blood turning into ice, turns his head back to 65536, or to where 65536 was a second ago. In its place, there’s a sitting opossum. It gives the Royal Guard one look and bolts under the bed with a squeak.

“*Fantastic*,” Sharp rolls his eyes in annoyance, hoping to hide the wave of relief that must be visible from space, “Now I’m going to have to catch him again.”

“What was it?”

“Princess Luna’s pet. You know, since ponies other than us ‘bats’ have been so *welcoming* to her since her return,” Sharp says with venom.

“Where is the princess?” asks the Royal Guard, closing the door behind himself.

“The princess has been in the dreamscape for the past few days. The changeling invasion made the mental state of ponies deteriorate significantly. I’m sure you’ve read the constant suicide reports... or at least the newspapers,” replies Sharp in an official tone, “She’s there, *alone*, dealing with nightmares that drive ponies insane en masse while your

unicorn *traitors* go behind the back of princess Celestia, the only pony who has any idea what Luna is facing, and they have the *audacity* to accuse her of siding with the changelings or whatever their syphilis-riddled minds concocted this time.”

The Royal Guard scowls.

“You’re going into the report.”

“Make sure to quote me in full and add a rough estimate of the bucks I give,” replies Sharp, “I’m sure that once princess Celestia learns of what they did, she’ll add a few choice words herself. A Nightguard not exactly excited to cooperate with a barely legal request will be at the end of their list of problems.”

“Hmph, I have to scan the place,” the unicorn’s horn lights up again, “Help me catch the rat or whatever the hay that thing was.”

“I’m sorry,” Sharp gives him an innocent expression, “That piece of toilet paper you brought grants you entry and clarifies the results of any obstruction. It does *not* grant the official cooperation of the Nightguard. Please, fill in the correct requisition form and I will allocate a small fraction of the common Guard budget for this joint venture.”

The Royal Guard growls but understands that he’s in this alone, so he sticks his head under the bed.

65536 darts out, accompanied by rays of golden light missing it by a thread and blasting Not-Blue harmlessly out, and hides behind a bookshelf.

The unicorn tries to telekinetically pull it out and the grasp almost reaches the squirming opossum who bolts out from the other side and slips under the bed again.

“Round two: Fight!” says Sharp seriously although with a growing grin.

“Get over here!” yells the unicorn, his horn flashing in tune with its telekinesis grasping for 65536.

This lasts until 65536 passes under Sharp and the unicorn's telekinesis grabs his foreleg. Sharp's silvery armor glistens unnaturally for a moment before the unicorn groans in pain of a magical feedback surging through his horn.

"Wha-?" he stumbles backwards.

"The Nightguard ponies need a few unique tools to deal with unicorn *criminals*, and reflective armor accessories are one of those," explains Sharp calmly, "Granted, it doesn't work anywhere near as well as actual protective spells but it gives us a moment of surprise," he approaches the Royal Guard blinking and shaking his head, and says in a surprisingly friendly tone, "Look, we're all in this to keep ponies safe so how about you just scan this place and stop scaring the poor thing?"

The Royal Guard glares at him for a moment before taking a deep breath, closing his eyes, and letting out a ray of golden light which slides all over the room before stopping on Sharp fizzling out.

"You're going to have to take that armor off. I can't get a proper reading," says the unicorn, unwilling to have his head scrambled again.

Sharp does so and subjects himself to scanning from all sides. When the unicorn stops his magic, he asks:

"So how bad is it, doc? Be straight with me! Am I a changeling?"

The Royal Guard simply turns around and walks out of the suite. Through the temporarily open door, Sharp can see four more Royal Guards which explains why the Nightguards let him inside before Sharp allowed it.

"Looking forward to cooperating with you again," says Sharp politely.

"...rat for a pet and flying rats for guards..." grumbles the Royal Guard as he and his companions leave, completely underestimating bat pony hearing.

Closing the door in pretense of wanting some privacy as he puts his armor back on, Sharp immediately pulls out 65536's drawing supplies, scribbles

something on a small piece of paper, and shoves it under the dresser which was the place where he last saw the transformed changeling.

The message says:

“Stay transformed until I send a bat pony for you. Listen to them no matter what.”

Somepony clearly has their eyes set on Luna’s suite, and without her presence it might not be safe anymore.

Once outside, he looks around and, seeing nopony, and presses a second piece of paper into Pink Sunset’s hoof before walking off.

“Get the opossum inside unseen to the Nightguard barracks on the top floor and destroy this message. Once up there, tell it it’s safe and don’t freak out. My and Luna’s orders. I don’t know what the spell that guy cast on me was so I’ll have a friend check it out in case it’s some kind of scrying.”

Pink Sunset raises an eyebrow but dutifully walks onto the nearby balcony, lights up a cigarette, and uses it to burn the message in a brazier by the edge. After a brief smoking break, he returns and unceremoniously walks into Luna’s suite. If questioned about it later, he can always say that Sharp forgot to enable the protective spells again.

“So... opossum, eh?” he mumbles to himself, “Where would I be if I were an-”

He finds himself looking at a small, grey head peeking from under a plush toy of princess Celestia on the floor near the bed. Unexpectedly, the little thing willingly slinks over to him, its head turning from side to side.

“Well, that was easy,” comments Pink, taking his saddlebag off and opening it in front of the critter. It jumps inside with little hesitation, only with a prolonged, sad glance at the plush toy. Seeing that, he grabs the fake Celestia as well, “Now, let’s get you upstairs.”

The Nightguard barracks is a series of rooms on the top floor of the castle. The central sleeping area is a long hall with beds on both sides, able to comfortably fit twenty ponies or, uncomfortably, probably a hundred tops. These days, though, fewer than ten Nightguards usually occupy the room at the same time with the occasional exception of visits and temporary postings. On one hoof, Pink Sunset ponders, it's a good thing, because it means that bat ponies are more welcome in Canterlot and can rent property without problems, although still mostly in lower Canterlot, and they don't need to resort to the 'safety in numbers' approach. On the other, it can sometimes get boring here. Still, every single bat pony here knows how things were before Luna's return so if the main problem of living here is a bit of boredom now and then, all the Nightguards currently residing here will gladly take it.

As for the few bat ponies residing here for an extended period of time, the three currently present look up at Pink Sunset as he enters the spacious living quarters.

"Sup?" asks a dark blue bat pony mare with brown mane, raising her amber eyes almost glowing in daylight from a book, "Unexpected shift change?"

"Not exactly, Gloom," replies Pink Sunset with a moment of hesitation, "To be completely honest, I'm not sure what this is about myself."

That draws the attention of the second Nightguard lying on a padded bench in the back, bench-pressing a loaded bar. With a grunt, he puts the bar away and sits up with a quizzical expression. In contrast with Pink Sunset and his lithe, agile figure, he's downright *chiseled*, with a dark green coat and short, black mane styled into a mohawk.

"Something to do with mom's disappearance?" he asks in a deep, naturally growly voice which nonetheless relay warm concern rather than anger.

"I don't know, Hunter," Pink shakes his head, "Where's Glims?"

Night Hunter nods his head towards an open door opposite his exercise corner through which the noise of running water can be heard. Steel Glimmer has to be using the common showers.

“Hmm, maybe I should wait for her.”

“She just went in. I wouldn’t hold your breath if you’re in a hurry,” Gloom has put down her book and joined the other two in the back corner, “Pink, you clearly want to say something so get to it... though if it has something to do with that chewed-up Celestia plush on your back I’m not *completely* sure I want to know.”

After letting out a nervous chuckle, Pink Sunset takes a deep breath.

“Alright. The Commander ordered me to do this and, judging by the way he did it, it’s *important*. That’s all I know,” he takes his saddlebag off and opens it, revealing a small, curious head peeking out.

“The Commander finally allowed us to have a pet?” Gloom’s eyes go wide.

“I think this one is mom’s or something,” replies Pink before looking directly at the opossum and adding, “It’s safe, little guy.”

The opossum looks around before crawling out of the bag which Pink quickly lowers to the ground. It jumps down on the floor and-

Whoosh!

As one, the three Nightguards jump backwards and assume combat stances as 65536 shapeshifts back into its changeling form.

“Ummm, hi?” says 65536, immediately reconsidering if transforming was the right idea. Was it supposed to wait for Sharp? Maybe-

“Oh, it’s you!” Gloom recovers and relaxes first, causing the other two bat ponies’ heads to snap towards her.

“A changeling...” Night Hunter breathes out.

“You *knew* about this?” Pink raises an eyebrow.

“I was on door duty when the Commander barged in while mom was doing something with this guy- changeling. Later, I asked Darky about it, you

know how much of a blabbermouth she is, and she said a changeling was helping them with a mission to find others who aren't all evil."

"Really?" asks Night Hunter, looking at 65536.

"Yup, that's me," the drone looks up at him, "I'm 65536."

"You look younger," comments the muscular bat pony, confusing the drone.

"65536 is a name or a rank or something, not age. Darky didn't exactly explain it," says Gloom.

"I see."

"I see too!" 65536 puts its forelegs over its eyes, their teal glow easily visible through the holes, "Even when I have hooves over my face."

"Should we ask Darky about it?" Gloom looks at Pink, "She takes day shifts most of the time so she should be at her office."

"I'd prefer keeping this under wraps until the Commander explains everything, because-"

Pink explains to them that the Royal Guards came with a warrant to search Luna's suite.

"-and they must have some evidence because the council of nobles wouldn't write their names on just *anything*. No matter how much they dislike us, direct harassment is beneath them," he finishes, "So I wouldn't be throwing the word changeling around too much."

"Got it," Night Hunter nods.

"I can just find a dark place and draw a bit," peeps 65536, "Oh wait... all my things are in Luna's room."

"I *did* bring this," Pink finally puts the Celestia plushie on the floor where 65536 immediately pulls it into a protective hug, although who's protecting whom remains a question.

“Eeeeeee!” seeing the tiny changeling and big plushie, Gloom can’t help grinning like an idiot.

“I can do that too! EEEEEEE!” 65536 joins in.

“My head...” groans Hunter.

“I think I’m about to lose a leg to sudden diabetes and it might be worth it,” Pink smirks.

“Pfff,” Gloom pouts at him, “You’re the one who looks as if somepony pulled a wad of cotton candy through a tub of lube.”

“Loob,” 65536 pokes Pink’s leg.

“Aaand that’s my cue to go. Explain this to Glims, will you?” as Gloom nods, Pink turns around to leave before remembering something, “You said something about drawing. Do you have a pencil or something?”

“Sharp Biscuit told me to hide my crayons under Luna’s bed before that unicorn came in.”

“I’ll bring it after my shift,” Pink nods.

“Be careful!” 65536 hops up and down, “Sharp said Luna’s room was dangerous if she’s not there.”

Pink laughs, giving 65536 a pat on the head.

“Thanks, but that was just to prevent others from going in. Mom knows what she’s doing when there’s magic involved, and if anypony really *is* keeping an eye on who goes in and out and when, I can always say that the Commander forgot to turn the protective spells back on.”

Once he’s done, 65536’s eyes dart nervously from Night Hunter to Gloom and back. The mare looks friendly but the big stallion is beyond scary. Gloom returns 65536’s stare, notices its drooping ears and its head sinking deeper between its shoulders.

“Don’t be scared of Hunter. If mom is okay with you, we’re all okay with you,” says Gloom, “The Nightguard is one big family.”

“You’ll understand if you stay here long enough,” nods the bulky bat pony, “It’s not so long ago when Canties thought about us the same as they think about you. Granted, you’ve given them a *top notch* reason to do so but we are far more willing to give you a chance if you are on our side.”

“I totally wanna help!” 65536 nods with vigor, “We’ve met a bunch of changelings so far and no one *really* wanted to attack you. Some even lived here before the invasion and had to obey the queen no matter what.”

“What are you good at?”

“We drones carry stuff! We’re the best at digging but Sharp said I wasn’t allowed to make holes in the castle...” 65536’s enthusiasm drops a tiny bit.

“That’s probably for the best,” Hunter smirks and grabs a weighted harness from a rack next to his bench.

“Come on, Hunter, don’t be a schlong,” Gloom frowns, “You’ll crush the little g-” she drifts off as Night Hunter puts the harness on top of 65536’s back and *carefully* starts letting go until it hangs over 65536 like a cheap, Nightmare Night bed sheet ghost costume.

“It’s a bit inconvenient but not *too* heavy,” comes a muffled squeaky voice from under the harness.

“You’re stronger than you look,” says Hunter, clearly impressed as he takes the harness off of 65536, “A *lot* stronger, actually.”

“Told ya - we’re born to carry stuff!” 65536 beams at him.

A fresh voice, strangely calm despite the circumstances, asks:

“When did you get a changeling butler, Hunter?”

The showering noise is gone and the bat pony who came out of the bathroom is a mare, one rather more *decorated* than the other two. Her

steel-grey coat is heavily tattooed with silvery white marks and immediately draws everyone's attention away from her rather common brown eyes and a monotone dark violet mane and tail.

"Imma drone, we don't battle, miss," explains 65536, "That's a job for warriors."

"We're to keep it safe, Glims," explains Gloom, "Mom's orders. 65536, this is Steel Glimmer. She usually takes longer in the shower," she points to the mare, "Glims, 65536."

Unsure how to proceed, Glimmer extends her hoof for 65536 to shake.

"Oooh, I know that one!" the changeling boops it with its nose, "Did I do it right?"

"Good enough," as Glimmer withdraws the hoof, she casually smacks the side of snickering Gloom's face.

"Killjoy," she replies.

Out of nowhere, something clicks in 65536's head.

"Hey, you all call Luna mom! How come? Sharp doesn't."

"The Commander is special," replies Glimmer, heading off towards a bed that's presumably hers.

"Yep," Gloom nods, "And everypony in the Nightguard considers Luna their second mom, whether they call her that or not."

"Oh my holes, she must have laid so many eggs!" exclaims 65536.

"*Adoptive* mom."

"We're changelings, we know all about adapting. I mean, the infiltrators do."

“No, that means- nevermind, let’s chalk it up to cultural differences and leave it at that.”

“Uhhh... I know what chalk is, but I’m a bit confused by the other words,” 65536 pouts.

“She means that some things are too difficult to explain when we’ve just met,” Night Hunter has returned to his dumbbells and is now doing a pony version of minotaur biceps curls, “It’s the same reason why none of us are freaking out and trying to set you on fire, which a Royal Guard, no matter which of the three major species they were, would do for sure.”

65536 scratches its head.

“That unicorn who tried to catch me in Luna’s place *did* sound really mean but Sharp said you all just want to protect ponies. In the end he even said Luna had rats for guards! Can I see them? I read about them in a book with pictures and having them as guards sounds really cool, because they can get into small places where you can’t but it must be hard to make the tiny armors.”

To its surprise, Night Hunter growls:

“That racist ass meant *us*. It was an insult meaning we’re filthy, diseased, and barely ponies. After Luna’s return and as the *details* about how it went spread, nopony believed we weren’t bloodsucking terrors of the night, even the neighbors who lived next door for years.”

“But that’s *mean!*” squeaks 65536 with a horrified expression, “That’s almost like with us and high ranks.”

“Almost?” Gloom raises an eyebrow.

“Are they allowed to eat you if they’re hungry or bored?” 65536 tilts its head.

“Oh stars...” Gloom breathes out.

“No,” Hunter shakes his head, switching his forelegs, “Technically speaking, it’s against the law to discriminate within Guard branches but laws can’t change hearts.”

“It’ll get better in time,” Gloom sits down next to 65536, casually starting to examine its wings and carapace from all sides. The drone doesn’t feel like it’s in any danger so it obliges her without questioning, “Mom’s been back for only 2 years and her return... left quite the impression on them.”

“They got their asses handed to them pretty badly,” snickers Hunter.

“You try to fight an alicorn and we’ll see how long you last,” Gloom rolls her eyes at him,

“Anyway, for the time being, we just have to spread out cheeks and take it like good girls,” Glimmer has rejoined them and is toweling herself off.

“Oooh! Lahk thith?”

The tattooed Nightguard pauses, staring blankly for a moment at 65536 spreading its mouth using the small hooks on the back of its forelegs.

“You know what? I’ll just say yes before Sharp tells me what I can or can’t say around you.”

“You’re adorable!” Gloom grabs the drone, squishing its cheeks together and booping its nose with hers.

As the barracks door opens and closes again, Pink Sunset smirks as he approaches the group and presents the selection of crayons along with a notepad to 65536.

“Glad to see you’re getting along,” he says.

“Who wants their picture done? Sharp said I can do potatorealistic drawings,” offers 65536.

Gloom hums to herself before saying:

“I’ve got a better idea. Hunty, you still got some of that glue around?”

Sharp Biscuit’s heart is racing when he lands on a top floor balcony closest to the Nightguard barracks and enters the castle. Thankfully, his contact didn’t find any residual magic on him and the chances of a common Royal Guard putting something untraceable on him were next to none. Still, it’s taken several hours and who knows what might have happened in the meantime since even a safe place like Luna’s quarters has been searched already.

Night Hunter and Steel Glimmer in the back of the long room block his view immediately as the door clicks and relax when they notice who is the one entering.

“Commander!” they say as one and salute.

“At ease,” Sharp nods, striding towards them. His eyes flicker to a pile of papers and crayons lying to the side, “How’s the package?”

“Just a second!” calls out Gloom, hidden behind the still saluting two, “Aaand done!” she takes her place in the line and salutes too.

“I said at ease,” Sharp raises an eyebrow.

“Give it a sec, Commander,” says Gloom with a smirk, “I remembered that Glims does those sexy fantasy cosplays and I had an idea.”

A moment later, 65536 joins the Nightguard lineup. Its leg holes are filled with crumpled paper colored in black crayon to make its legs look whole. It’s wearing a pretty basic grey replica of the Nightguard armor made of folded papers glued together as well as a fitting helmet.

“Private Buzz, rep- umm, what was it?” 65536 looks up at Gloom who remains staring at Sharp and saluting, “Oh right! Private Buzz, reporting for booty!”

“Damn straight!” chuckles Night Hunter.

“Duty!” hisses Gloom at the changeling.

“Oops, duty!”

65536 joins the salute. As the other three lower their forelegs, 65536 tries to do that too.

Unfortunately, its foreleg is stuck to its forehead. On attempt two, 65536 notices the entire helmet is glued to its head. By that time, it’s too late and in an attempt to take a step forward, 65536 faceplants onto the floor.

“Damn it!” curses Gloom, reaching to help 65536 get up and learning the hard way that the drone is glued to the floor by its face, “Told you we should have done the helmet first so that it would dry up in time.”

“But the armor looked so coool!” comes a complaint muffled by the marble floor.

Sharp doesn’t miss a beat, although he notes to himself that he should leave ASAP and bring a camera. Luna will want to see this.

“Welcome to the family, recruit,” he salutes back.

Author's Notes:

The threatening grasp of danger reaches for the little one. Oh no!
As the bat pony lore expands, why do I have the sudden desire to write something Nightguard related from the time before Luna's return?
Something Pratchett-like with Sharp Biscuit as Wimes, Choking Darkness as Angua, and... who would be Carrot?
All these ideas but without the required time or skill.

65536: 12

Darkness fell on the castle, the Nightguards left the barracks for their respective duties, and 65536 was left alone after being pried out of its glue and paper armor. Said armor would require some serious rebuilding because, before leaving, Pink Sunset got 65536 several cardboard boxes from the kitchen supply closet to supplant the original layered paper structure. After everyone had gone, 65536 decided that accidentally getting stuck to things with the remains of the glue was slowing its efforts down and it could take a shower like Steel Glimmer was doing when it arrived.

“Scrub scrub scrub,” 65536 doesn’t have a sponge which for the hard carapace of a drone is absolutely unnecessary, so it simply works its best to scratch the remains of the dried up mix of glue and some paper off with the help of some borrowed soap.

It looks directly up to the shower nozzle and opens its mouth. The hardened membrane protecting changeling eyes allows it to enjoy the simple warmth all over its body without any damage to its sight.

“Blub blub blub.”

A sudden moving rainbow reflection from its soaped up leg hole catches its attention and it blows into the hole.

“Bubblebubblebubble- stop! You still have work to do.”

65536 turns the shower off, spreads its wings, and starts buzzing them as hard as it can to dry itself off.

Practice salute? Looking good. Leg glued to head? No? Perfect!

Time to get to fixing the flat colors of the new cardboard parts of its armor. Within minutes, 65536 is lying on the ground, a crayon in its mouth and many more scattered around it within reach.

“Grey, purple... no, darker purple,” it mumbles to itself, “Exactly like the armor Night Hunter showed me.”

Some sort of a completely silent flash barely visible from the corner of its eye catches the drone’s attention and it looks up. A shimmering golden dot surrounded by a hoof-sized aura is floating through the barracks, darting from side to side and hovering momentarily over Nightguard beds as if searching for something.

“Huh? A floating shiny?” 65536 stands up, narrowing its eyes.

As if hearing the words, the shiny beelines towards 65536, trailing golden sparks, and starts circling over its head.

“What could you be?” 65536 reaches out to touch it. The shiny deftly dodges to the side, stops, and starts shaking again.

“Are ya laughing at me, shiny? I’ll get ya!” pumped-up by the taunt, 65536 pounces at it but, with unnatural accuracy, it passes through the holes of the drone’s legs, tickling a little.

65536 grins, rising from the ground to face it again.

“This is the Nightguard base and Sharp said I was a horrible- no, honorable- no... honorary, right, Nightguard so I have to detain you!”

The shiny shakes and makes a few circles in the air.

“No, you’re not a Nightguard! You’re not wearing the right kind of helmet,” 65536 points to the cardboard one on the floor, “Like that one.”

The floaty flies into the helmet and remains there, glowing. 65536 puts its muzzle on the floor and looks directly into the open front section of the armor piece.

“Nice try, but Sharp has to say if you can be a horrorbabble Nightguard like myself-”

With a small flash, the shiny fades into nothing as 65536 hears the barracks door click and swing open. The drone stifles a squeak of surprise, quickly darting under the closest bed.

The door closes again but no one seems to have come inside. Puzzled, 65536 peeks out of his hiding spot.

Nothing.

Then the bed above it creaks as if something *heavy*, much heavier than a pony, stood on it.

65536 can *feel* the stare locked on the back of its head and it slowly turns around.

Nothing.

Nothing that suddenly shifts and reveals a bright smile.

“Gotcha!” a female voice laughs.

“Princess Sunbutt!” 65536 slides its whole body from under the bed and hugs the huge muzzle, “How did you find me?” it lets go and stands up on all fours properly.

A small spark flies out of Celestia’s horn, gradually growing in brightness until it transforms into the dancing light from before.

“Yay, floaty!” 65536 jumps at the dot, missing the agile trickster once again.

“I was worried about you when I didn’t find you in my sister’s room, but then I found a little note about you being brought here and I used a little searching spell specifically tailored to avoid most of the magical alarms and barriers built into this castle. It’s not the quickest but it works.”

65536’s suddenly sober expression gives Celestia a pause.

“Since Luna hasn’t come back yet and there was some angry guard searching her room, Sharp decided I would be safer here with other batponies.”

“Angry guard?” Celestia narrows her eyes, “Tell me everything, will you?”

“Mhm.”

65536 proceeds to tell her its version of events leading to it leaving the safety of Luna’s castle suite. In the end, Celestia is frowning at the wall while absent-mindedly stroking the drone’s head.

“-and I like it here too. It’s not as cozy but the Nightguards helped me make my own armor and Sharp said I was a honor- honorary one, got it this time! But they’re all gone now,” finishes 65536.

Celestia sighs.

“Please, don’t think all Royal Guards are like that. Many guards resigned after the invasion so we’ve pulled reserves and guards from other cities whose loyalties lie more with the *strictest* interpretation of our laws rather than the merciful one.”

“The Nightguards have all been super nice so far.”

“Unlike unicorns, they and earth ponies know well how it feels to be treated like a second-rate citizen.”

“I heard that before but I don’t understand why,” 65536 looks up into her eyes, “You ponies are all warm, soft, and fuzzy.”

“Unicorns tend to think they’re superior to other species due to their magic while earth ponies can only do manual labor and pegasi weather manipulation can be done by magic as well. In the old days, unicorns even used ‘lesser races’ as slaves.”

To her grim surprise, 65536 understands almost immediately now.

“Oh, so it’s like with us drones and infiltrators. They can do all the mental and transforming tricks while we just dig holes and carry stuff.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it. The last time ponies dealt openly with changelings was a very long time ago.”

“Huh? I thought you ponies never met us,” 65536 tilts its head, “Even Luna didn’t know what I was.”

Celestia hugs the drone tighter.

“Luna was gone for a millennium, little one, and... disappeared during a very tumultuous time. What happened to her fragmented her memories to a degree that might be beyond repair. Besides, I prefer she makes new, happier ones, something you seem to be helping with.”

“I wish she came back...”

“So do I, 65536. So do I. However, the best we can do is deal with the turmoil here in the real world. You saw what was happening, what Beacon had to save you from.”

65536 nods, puffs out its cheeks, and says:

“I don’t really know what all that happened meant but I want to help.”

Celestia smiles with pride.

“You actually can, which is why I was looking for you.”

“...awesomeawesomeawesomeawesome...”

“I need help feeding the changelings we recovered from the tavern you visited with the Nightguards.”

“I’m ready and buzzing with energy!” 65536 wrestles itself out of Celestia’s embrace, stands at attention, and salutes, “But I’m only a drone, if you moved all the changelings here there’s no way I have enough.”

“I don’t expect you to be perfect, just do your best, honorary Nightguard,” Celestia salutes back, smiling, “But first, since you said you still couldn’t transform on demand, I have to mask you.”

“I’m working on my armor,” 65536 points to the cardboard mess on the floor, “I almost got the helmet right and I totally scratched all the glue off this time so it doesn’t stick to my head anymore.”

“I’ve got something better in mind,” Celestia’s horn lights up and a spark hits 65536’s chest before scattering all over its carapace with no visible effect.

“That tickled,” the drone examines its forelegs, “but I don’t think it worked.”

“It did. Any too aggressive spell would trigger the castle alarms, especially the ones in the dungeons. This is just a suggestion spell which causes anypony who doesn’t know exactly who you are to think you’re a Nightguard on duty.”

“Can I-”

“Yes, you can wear your helmet, it will only make the suggestion stronger.”

“YESSSS!” 65536 darts past her and rams the purple and grey cardboard helmet on its head.

“Now now, we’re not done yet,” Celestia raises her hoof, presenting a solar talisman, “You’re going to need this to get to the magically locked changeling cells as well as to pass unquestioned by the Royal Guards.”

“Aren’t there Nightguards on duty now?”

“Not in the dungeons, no. They’re out in the city or patrolling the less... critical parts of the castle. It would take too long to explain why, so let’s just say that I don’t have *absolute* say in how the security of Equestria is managed in day-to-day matters, and the council of nobles is heavily prejudiced against batponies.”

“Maybe we’re not so different...”

“Much less than you can imagine,” muses Celestia, “But that’s neither here nor there right now. Maybe I’ll tell you a story or two one day when things have calmed down.”

“I like stories now that they don’t make my head hurt.”

“You know what? I’ll tell you something interesting you don’t know as a reward for helping the changelings, okay?”

“Huh...” 65536 blinks, “Hey, there must be so many interesting things I don’t know!”

“Well, do your job right and soon there will be one less.”

65536 on unsteady legs wobbles out of the last cell holding the rescued changelings, its vision swimming. As it stands there, gasping for breath, the talisman given to it by princess Sunbutt flashes and the door locks itself. The castle dungeons are empty at this time of night, manned only by a trio of Royal Guards stationed at the entrance, so 65536 can take its time to recover, as it should be able to hear any approaching patrol over the occasional angry banging or screaming from a random cell.

As a drone, it really couldn’t do much more than give the hibernating changelings a few days of life. It couldn’t help them heal faster, it couldn’t help them feel better, and doing anything to actually help them return to their lives was completely beyond the tiny drop of love even a fully filled drone could hold. Still, a few more days could lead to another few days, and in time 65536 might not be in this on its own.

With only one goal in mind now, 65536 stumbles into a different cell, this one empty and unlocked, and lies down under the plank of wood bolted to the wall serving as a bed. A pony wouldn’t fit in there but a changeling drone has no such problem. In fact, the familiar tight and cold space brings back some of the few pleasant memories of home.

“It’s a bit of a squeeze. I wonder how I look with princess Sunbutt’s spell on me,” it mumbles and closes its eyes.

Said princess arrives within fifteen minutes, waking the drone slowly nodding off up, and magically locking the door behind herself.

“My apologies, Raven still needed to discuss some policy issues for tomorrow,” Celestia sits down on the bed creaking under her weight after 65536 crawls out and levitates it into her lap, “She’s an incurable workaholic. Now, I promised you a reward, didn’t I?”

“Can I have a question first?”

“Sure.”

“Why couldn’t *you* feed the changelings? I can’t help them as much as they need but you’ve been filling me up no problem.”

Celestia goes silent for a moment before saying:

“Love... love is a strange thing, 65536, one that doesn’t come on command. Besides, as I told you before - I have eyes on me for many reasons. Even by this I’m risking tomorrow’s headlines being ‘Princess meets her new, secret Nightguard paramour’,” she shakes her head, “I don’t want anypony to dig deep into what’s in the magically protected cells. Grandmaster Beacon did his best to keep them safe during the process of moving them here and me visiting them would only draw attention. Anyway, I promised you something interesting plus-” she lowers her head and gives 65536 a peck on its forehead, revitalizing the drone a little, “a little frosting.”

“Mmmmmmm...” it snuggles its back tighter against Celestia’s barrel.

“Now, stories about old changelings as well as Luna’s past are fairly grim, so I think we could use something to brighten the day- well, night. How would you feel if I told you that there used to be a species of ponies that had wings just like yours?”

“Whooooah! Did they have holes too?”

“They didn’t, not in their legs nor their wings. They did have antennae, though.”

She puts her forelegs to her ears and wobbles her fetlocks.

“What for?”

“They had innate talent for mental magic, a certain kind of it at least.”

“THAT’S LIKE US! I mean... the infiltrator us, not us drone us.”

“That’s a lot of us, but no. They existed before changelings, they couldn’t change shape, their mind magics weren’t about control, and they had pony coats, not an exoskeleton.”

65536 tenses up, looking around.

“Where?! Skeletons are spooky! You gotta be careful when you find one underground. That means something ate something else and we drones are pretty edible.”

Celestia taps on 65536’s chest: “I meant that they didn’t have a carapace.”

“Oh! Oof, you scared me for a moment. Did those ponies at least have a queen?”

“No, they had a king. A wonderful stallion and my companion for many, many decades of both peace and hardship. You see, unified Equestria is an old nation by the standards of the world but far from the first ones. Pony tribes had their own states, kingdoms, even short-lived empires on this continent for millennia before Equestria. Same is true for the griffons, minotaurs, or pony species on different continents. Civilisations rose and fell throughout my life, even we alicorns had a sprawling city state which lasted for ages,” Celestia sighs, “Back when there were more than the last few of us, I mean,” she shakes her head, “But I said I’d avoid the grim stories today, so let’s stick to the flutterponies.”

“Fluffer ponies?”

“I know your ears work just fine, little one,” she playfully taps the back of 65536’s head.

“I made improvements! Carry spaces are cool but I think I like hugging coats more.”

“Carapaces.”

“Yeah, that!”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” Celestia chuckles, “Flutterponies were quite huggable indeed. Luckily for them, their life away from major settlements meant that ponies weren’t exactly lining up for surprise hugging.”

“Why luckily? Why did they live far away? Were they scared of other ponies?”

“They were natural empaths. They could easily sense the emotions of others, so living among creatures who didn’t possess the ability to shield themselves could get rather overwhelming to the point of pain. Among their kind, they could use telepathy to communicate.”

“What’s teleparty?”

“Telepathy and, once again, I know you heard me right,” says Celestia with just a hint of sternness in her voice.

“I did... it’s just that sometimes similar things just get jumbled up when I need to think quickly. Drones aren’t made to be smart and I bopped my head pretty hard on top of that. Sorry...”

“That’s okay, little one, I should have remembered,” she returns to stroking its head, “So, the fluffers could talk to each other without using their mouths- hmm, telepathy isn’t correct either,” she pauses, “They couldn’t *talk* using their minds, per se. They didn’t need language as we understand it. They just understood each other’s intentions with perfect clarity, so they couldn’t lie.”

“We can talk in our heads too but it’s like real words. And we have images!”

“Sounds interesting.”

“It totally is. I wish I could show you!”

“Unfortunately, there is no magic I know of that would allow a pony mind to connect with a changeling one,” Celestia hums.

“Huh? Then how do the infiltrators do it? They can mess with pony heads.”

“That’s different. I could alter the memories of a pony too, and I’m not exactly a great magician. In the same way, I could use magical telepathy to communicate with another pony but that still wouldn’t work like your natural ability. I’d have to *become* a changeling to communicate like that, and *that’s* impossible.”

“Awww...”

“Life isn’t perfect,” Celestia smiles, “Oh shoot, I got distracted again. What was I talking about?”

“Ponies with changeling wings who lived away from others, didn’t like hugs but not really, and were fluffy.”

“Your ability to summarize the important parts astounds me.”

“I’m learning all kinds of awesome things from you ponies!”

“Well done, well done. Anyway, the story-”

“Your Highness! Are you there, Your Highness?” someone bangs at the door, making 65536 immediately slink behind Celestia.

“The door is held by my magic,” she whispers to the drone and points under the bed, “Hide there, I’ll see what it’s about and then we’ll continue, okay?”

65536 nods, hiding again as Celestia leaves the cell. A short, hushed conversation later, it hears hoofsteps gradually disappear.

Minutes pass until quiet hoofsteps approach the cell and the door opens, letting in a blond, well-built unicorn wearing the garments 65536 associates with castle staff. The servant quickly looks around, his eyes stopping on the space under the bed. He leans down, cracks a smile, and gestures to 65536 to come over, closing the cell door with his telekinesis.

The drone peeks outside and shimmies out from its hiding place.

“Did princess Sunbutt send you?” it whispers.

The servant puts a hoof to his mouth and nods.

65536 walks over, looks into the unicorn’s eyes and-

-a sharp spike of pain from its side makes it yelp and stumble backwards.

The serrated levitating knife rips its chitin apart as the unicorn grins and twirls the floating dagger in the air, splattering green blood and chunks of flesh around. His grin fades as the wound stops bleeding in front of his eyes, leaving only the hole in the chitin.

65536 immediately realizes several things. One, the pony can’t have been sent by princess Sunbutt. Two, it won’t be able to heal a second wound like that because while the princess fed it, its body didn’t have time to digest the love properly yet. And three, it has to get out no matter what. The princess said that not all Royal Guards were mean so maybe one of them at the dungeon entrance will help it.

How can I get out if he’s standing in front of the door?

65536 darts under the bed again, watching its surroundings for the floating knife.

It comes flying in but 65536 manages to catch it with its leg hook and pull it under itself. The unicorn growls and 65536 sees his legs approaching.

65536's only warning comes as a flash of light and heat from above as the unicorn raises one foreleg. However, if anything, drones are used to sudden things. Sudden noises mean get out, sudden heat means get out, sudden movements mean get out. In fact, nearly all sudden things mean getting out of where a drone currently is, with the only difference being the amount of seconds the drone might have to examine the exact nature of danger, and all its senses are currently *screaming* negative five. It kicks itself off of the wall just as the blade of fire coming out of the unicorn's foreleg slices the bed in half and scorches the stone floor.

As the unicorn curses, 65536 charges forward to get between his legs but his reactions are quick enough to kick the drone away which is followed by a slash of the once again floating dagger. Without the moment of surprise, though, the wound is shallow and 65536 can barely feel more than a sting.

The unicorn advances, making 65536 back off step after step until it realizes one thing - he's been herding it into a corner. He grins again as 65536's butt touches the wall and the drone can't help turning its head backwards. 65536 yelps again as another slash of the dagger shreds a chunk of its chest carapace away in its moment of distraction.

65536 has no idea why any of this is happening but right now there's only one thing to do.

"I'm sorryyyy!" it calls out as it lunges itself under the unicorn again, and *digs*. The unicorn's kicking leg meets 65536's digging hoof, an interaction which can go only one way.

The unicorn *screams* as his fetlock gets *sheared* clean off and he lands with his full weight on the stump. 65536 charges towards the door and rams into it as the handle fails to open. The drone looks backwards at the wheezing unicorn's eyes bulging in agony. Despite that, though, his horn is glowing as he holds the door closed. What's worse, the dagger starts shaking again as well.

There's no other way. 65536 *digs* through the door providing nearly no resistance to its shimmering forelegs and pushes half of its body through the hole before-

“AAAAAAAAAAAH?!” its scream resonates through the dungeon hallways, immediately followed by stomping of armored hooves from the distant entrance.

65536 is now stuck due to the knife stabbed through its back up to the handle and sticking out of its belly.

“Just die, you damn cockroach...” grunts the unicorn, limping towards 65536 while leaving a red trail on the floor.

With the knife stuck inside it, 65536 backs off, widens the hole in one swing, and finally jumps through just as two Royal Guards round the corner and point at it.

“A changeling, in the castle?!”

65536 doesn’t wait for anything and bolts. It doesn’t have a plan, it just knows it has to get *away*.

It disappears behind the corner at the other end of the corridor thanks to the two guards stopping by the cell from where the unicorn servant limps out.

“The damn thing did this time me,” he shows them his missing fetlock, “It’s dangerous.”

“We’ll escort you-”

“Don’t worry, I can limp my way to the castle infirmary on my own. Just make sure the changeling doesn’t do this to anypony else, please.”

The leading guard taps a badge on his chest plate, saying:

“Block the entrance and call in reinforcements to sweep the dungeons. There’s a changeling on the loose.”

With that, the Royal Guards exchange glances and start galloping ahead, following the green trail of blood on the floor.

“Council nonsense this late. They really should reconsider what constitutes *business crucial to the security of Equestria*,” grumbles Celestia as she descends the last few steps leading to the guard room by the only entrance to the castle dungeons.

There’s only one unexpectedly alert guard where there were three before she left who salutes and blocks her way, much to her surprise.

“Your Highness, a changeling got into the castle and crippled one of the servant staff just a moment ago. It’s not safe in there until we-”

It takes the guard a moment to realize why his backside suddenly feels to be *sizzling*, but it might have something to do with the rainbow mane of the princess whom he’d never before seen as anypony other than a motherly, peaceful figure turning for mere two seconds into a raging orange inferno.

She unceremoniously shoves the fully armored unicorn sideways with strength clearly relaying that even a female alicorn who doesn’t look ripped whatsoever could probably throw him *over* the entire castle, and she breaks into a run straight ahead through a door-

Correction, through a square-shaped hole surrounded by the dripping remains of the molten frame. The door simply doesn’t exist anymore.

Celestia reaches the cell where she left 65536 within seconds, her thundering hoofsteps leaving behind burn marks in the floor. Her heart almost stops and her eyes tear up as she looks inside and sees the splatters of green blood all over and the burnt bed. However, that’s not all there is, and she quickly teleports a chunk of mangled gory mess which *can’t* belong to a changeling lying in a *red* pool away.

“The intrusion into Luna’s quarters on the Council orders,” her mind races a mile a minute, “Nonsensical meeting about nothing this late. Somepony wanted to get 65536... and they did.”

As she leaves the cell, her keen ears catch, among the stomping of the guards, a high-pitched yelp and...

...and a crunch.

“No,” she breathes out, following the noise as well as the trail of green blood.

The two Royal Guards are standing at a dead end, one looking up into the broken entrance to a ventilation shaft splattered with green blood and one examining a green-stained dagger with a jagged edge. On the wall, there’s a closed entrance into the dumbwaiter, although that one is without any blood marks.

“Your Highness!” the guards notice her as she rips the dagger from the telekinetic grip of the one examining it and levitates it towards herself.

“Check the roof and begin the sweep of the ventilation system,” she orders immediately.

“What about that?” the guard nods towards the dumbwaiter.

“A changeling would use a route through which it can’t be followed, so scour the vents first. Just to be safe, though, order a patrol to be stationed on every floor by the dumbwaiter as well and lock this one,” she nods to the metal plate with a latch covering the dumbwaiter shaft and the padlock hanging on a hook next to it.

The crunch she heard can’t have been from the ventilation grate...

65536 is lying on the bottom of the dumbwaiter shaft under the wreckage of the dumbwaiter itself. It doesn’t have the strength to heal its reopened wounds anymore after ripping the dagger out of itself, breaking the vent entrance, squeezing its blood all over the place, and temporarily stopping itself from bleeding out as it crawled into the dumbwaiter shaft and pulled the metal plate down behind itself.

It tried to climb up with the help of its wings but must have accidentally dug through some critical part of the contraption because the next thing it

knew was the whole thing barreling straight down on it and slamming straight into its back and crushing its wings under its weight as it took 65536 all the way to the bottom with it.

I can't stay here. They're bound to look eventually.

The vertical shaft is pitch black so that might give 65536 time before anyone notices the dumbwaiter is broken since, hopefully, it doesn't get used too much during the night.

Must... dig.

A slow motion of its foreleg is accompanied by the softest of green glimmers as its hoof slides through the wreckage lying on it like a hot knife through butter.

Again and again until the drone can push through. It has to get out of here and there seem to be only a few exits along the shaft. If it can reach at least the first one...

Its hooves grow tiny spikes as its carapace loses all of its protective capability and transforms into a light membrane, and it begins crawling upwards, not knowing whether its energy would last. All 65536 knows is that if it drops in this state, it'll pop like a balloon and die instantly.

Can't stay here. Can't stay here. Can't stay here.

It keeps repeating the mantra. Staying in a dark hole means something will eventually find it. Weak and lonely drones who get discovered get eaten. There are only horrors in the dark, only enemies, only...

65536 doesn't know how long the climbing took. All of its thinking processes have shut down, replaced only by survival instinct that keeps forcing it to put one leg above other and pulling itself up hoof by hoof until-

-until the uneven stone surface gives way to something smoother - steel.

The drone remains hanging there, listening for anything, but while it can faintly hear commotion through the noise of blood rushing in its ears, it

doesn't seem to be coming from the other side of the metal plate.

The velcro-like mini hooks on the underside of its hoof allow it to slide the metal plate sideways and, with tears streaming from its eyes, pull itself through into a dark room, landing on the smooth, tiled floor of... somewhere.

Hoofsteps.

It opens its eyes but through the haze of absolute exhaustion and tears it can't make anything out of the approaching silhouette. It doesn't even flinch anymore as a telekinetic grip shoves it into a sack filled with remains of some sticky dust, and a male voice growls:

"Be quiet and don't move!"

It just doesn't have the strength to do anything other than pass out.

Author's Notes:

There's sliding into the grim and then there is being shot out of the cannon into it.

1313: 5

As good an idea as it seemed to promise to attend real paladin training in front of Celestia, Grandmaster Beacon's immediate dismissal probably saved 1313's carapace. However, as the weekend allotted for paladin reserve training drew closer, 1313 was less and less sure that trying to improve Blueblood's reputation might have not been the best idea.

Zamira, pacing back and forth through Blueblood's study in front of 1313 huddled in an armchair somehow managing to hug his hind legs, suddenly stops and looks directly at 1313:

"Welp, I'm out of ideas. It's been nice knowing you, 1313."

"VERY USEFUL!" the changeling's eye twitches.

"Said the guy who decided that attending a *paladin* training as a highly fragile changeling was a good idea."

"Why are you like this?"

"A prissy little mare punched you and your muzzle almost broke off. Now imagine that nutter Beacon hitting you with a practice sword, you porcelain ninny!"

"Tell me, what *exactly* did I get myself into?"

"That's the point - I can't," Zamira rolls her eyes, "Paladin reserve training is the only event I specifically wasn't allowed to visit with Blueblood."

"It can't be that bad. Blueblood is still princess Celestia's nephew. She wouldn't be too happy if he returned to her in a box."

"Blueblood isn't the one who breaks in two in a strong breeze. "

"Shoot. I can't call it off anymore, can I?"

“If you did that *after* promising it in front of princess Celestia and Blueblood learned about it, he would blow you up immediately. There’s only one thing aside from power and status he wants and that’s her approval.”

“Okay, okay, breathe 1313. Zamira, is there a way you *can* help me?”

“This is a hole you specifically dug for yourself in such a way that makes it impossible. The only thing I know is that Blueblood always came back completely exhausted and spent the next day whining about his legs. Knowing that knows diddly squat about magic, I doubt the reserves learn complex spells or anything so my guess is that they carry something heavy and probably levitate a sword for a long time.”

“So... stamina will be the key, probably,” 1313 takes a long and slow breath, “Hmm, do you know of any treasured items that might be filled with love I could feed from? Just like the first time we ‘met’. I’m feeling okay right now but okay sounds like it might not be enough.”

“Maaaybe.”

“Look, I promise I won’t break it. Besides, you know by now how our feeding works. I returned your dream catcher to you in one piece.”

“I had to rig the washing machine to *boil* the water to get the green stuff off of it!”

“Oh dear.”

“It *exploded* and startled the poor servant who went down to wash stuff after me!”

“You forgot to un-rig it, didn’t you?”

“UNIMPORTANT!”

“Fine, I’m sorry. I promise I’ll try my hardest to avoid throwing up, drooling, bleeding, or squirting any other bodily fluids even remotely in the direction of any treasured item you can provide for me.”

“Well...”

“Pleeeeeeease!”

“Fine, okay, geez. Just stop it with those puppy eyes.”

“Thank you. If I get through this weekend alive I... I...” 1313’s voice gradually fades, “I don’t have anything to give you in return.”

Even the slightly distraught infiltrator notices that Zamira was waiting for this when she smirks.

“I just thought of something that might be of interest to both of us.”

“You jumped on that *suspiciously* quickly.”

“Some level of jumping might be included, yes.”

“You lost me there.”

“I think you should go to bed early to catch some Zs.”

“I wish I wasn’t too nervous to sleep.”

“There’s a Z who can help with that too.”

“Waaaaait a minute...”

“You *did* say something along the lines of love *and* lust being a good meal.”

“But I can’t transform into the Diamond Dog you wanted.”

“We’ll save that one for when all this is over. Gotta have something to look forward to. You see, Blueblood is kinda hot but no mare with a hint of self-respect would touch his insufferable ass with a long pole. You, on the other hoof, know how to listen when a mare tells you to do something, so you?”

“Crazy striped lady, most high rank infiltrators are female, our entire species is ruled by a queen whose word is absolute, and saying the word

king gets you an express ticket into the crusher.”

“Gooooood,” her grin only grows more devilish, “I’ve got a few ideas of a way Blueblood can open his mouth without ruining somepony’s day.”

“The jacuzzi?”

“Better - Blueblood’s bed.”

“I’m an evil, mind manipulating bug monster and even I must say that you’re an inspiration to us all.”

It’s the fateful morning and 1313 finds himself walking through upper Canterlot towards the castle grounds. Supposedly, the paladin headquarters is a cathedral situated outside the castle proper, directly by the walls separating the gardens from the rest of Canterlot. Even through the haze of nervousness, 1313 vaguely recalls seeing some huge and well-lit building not too far away from the castle the last time he was there for the ball.

However, what’s occupying 1313’s attention the most is that somepony is following him and, the worst part, they’re good at it. He’s pretty sure that without infiltrator experience and changeling senses, his tail would go unnoticed even in the mostly empty streets of the early morning city.

Whoever they are, they know well what they’re doing, but they have nothing on a changeling.

Now, the question is simple - are they a guard watching out for Blueblood, are they a thief following a visibly wealthy mark, or are they following 1313?

After roughly half an hour of casually walking through the city, he still doesn’t get an answer as he finds himself standing on the other side of the street, facing the entrance of the paladin cathedral. Unfortunately, even now, before five o’clock, there are two fully suited-up paladins already watching him with no signs of boredom or weariness. They are *ready*.

The worst part, though, is the faint blue shimmer occasionally passing through both heavily decorated wings of the huge, ornate front gate.

Damn, a barrier, a persistent scanning spell? This is bad. Can't turn around now, they're looking at me.

Plan plan plan plan plan...

Okay, so... the second anything moves, I bolt. It's a bunch of paladins so I'm probably boned either way but I'm not the one wearing full plate armor.

Just. Stay. Cool.

Under the watchful eyes of the paladins on guard, 1313 crosses the street, its infiltrator instincts taking control and stopping his legs and voice from trembling as he greets the duo:

“Good morning. I’m here for the-”

“Reserves, we know,” says one paladin firmly, his horn flashes, and one wing of the gate opens just enough for 1313 to pass through.

The moment his entire body is inside the building, the barrier flickers and the gate closes, making 1313 feel *extremely* small even in the square antechamber. The door ahead is open, clearly leading to the great hall while the two normal doors on the sides are closed. Judging by the look 1313 got from the outside, they must lead into corridors lining the outer edge of the building.

Ooookay, that was... weir-

“Blueblood,” says a powerful and unpleasantly familiar voice echoing through the empty cathedral.

“Ah, buc-” 1313’s entire nervous system does that ‘hitting an elbow on the edge of the table’ thing, “Grandmaster Beacon, you surprised me.”

The changeling’s minigun-mimicking heart must be the loudest thing in the whole place and yet Beacon’s expression of keen observation mixed with

slight disgust seems to be exactly the same as at the ball.

“You surprised *me*, Blueblood,” Beacon measures him, “And here I was thinking you were just blowing smoke.”

“I- I can’t disappoint my aunt like that without at least trying to make things right,” 1313, gradually calming down due to the surprising lack of being chopped into pieces by blades burning with fires of the vengeful sun, faces the paladin grandmaster.

Beacon scoffs.

“Admirable. Now go get suited up and then report back here,” he points his horn towards the door to the great hall, “The armory is that way, in case your lazy ass forgot since last time. Third door on the right and I’m sure even you can recall the rest of the way.”

“Yes, Grandmaster,” 1313 gives him a quick bow before turning away and leaving at a significantly quicker pace.

I can’t read that guy at all. On the other hole, I still have all my bits without having to gather them from a landfill so that’s a bonus..

The paladin armor is significantly lighter than it looks from the outside, and 1313 keeps thanking the hive mind for the stroke of luck from the time he starts putting it on until he, fully suited, returns to the great hall and sits down in front of the raised dais at the end opposite the entrance. From the amount of chairs and the three long tables spanning the entire length of the hall, this place must be able to host about three hundred paladins when full.

Within fifteen minutes, four other young paladins-to-be arrive and find their eyes locked on Beacon who enters the hall from the door leading to the corridor with the armory, walks up onto the podium, and clears his throat.

Don’t make a fuss. No one really likes Blueblood, from what I gather, so I can stay in the back without talking to anyone.

“Usually, the first order of business is breakfast.”

FUSS, PANIC, PROBLEMS!

“However, I have prepared something special for you this weekend.”

Not good. Special is never good.

“You will have to eat on the way.”

Way where? Am I going to be put down behind a shed?

“Where are we going, sir?” asks a rather polite sounding unicorn noble 1313 doesn’t know.

Ooof, thank holes I’m not the only one who’s lost here.

“We’re going to visit an old ‘friend’ of mine, Hayfield, in order to test both your physical and mental resilience. You see, so far we’ve been focusing on the technical aspects of being a paladin reserve - the practice fighting, the physical exercises, and the occasional casting of spells. However, a controlled environment doesn’t teach you... enough. Enemies don’t wait with their ambush until you’re ready, nor do they attack only when you are at full strength. Over this weekend, we will see how you fare during a scenario similar to a paladin being deployed into a hostile territory. First, we will be marching south from Canterlot in full gear. That’s why I said you’d have breakfast on the way.”

That’s not too bad, actually. Unless someone is watching me all the time, I might be able to lie about having already eaten my share.

“And after the march?” asks the curious noble.

“That’s classified,” replies Beacon.

“How are we supposed to prepare for a mission when we don’t know what it is?” asks a blond unicorn 1313 recognizes as the one whom Zamira identified as Leo Goldhorn during the ball.

“Sometimes it is necessary to deliver information on a need to know basis. That’s what the command structure is for. It does not matter if the problem is insufficient scouting or simply the risk of you, the lowest-ranked expedition members, being captured and not having any information to divulge. Imagine you are a paladin like me, *Goldhorn*. You’ve gone through rigorous training and you joined to protect Equestria from darkness beyond the reach of anyone else. All of us share the same goal so why would you need to question orders?” before Leo can say anything, Beacon raises his hoof and adds, “Yes, I understand that ‘I only obeyed orders’ is the worst and the most common excuse for committing crimes against equinity. However, for the purposes of this exercise let’s leave the possibility of either incompetent or duplicitous commander out. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the reserves salute.

“Good, get up and get moving.”

With Beacon and a second paladin by the name Platinum Heart setting the rather quick but still manageable pace by walking in front of the five reserves, the young nobles following them through upper Canterlot and then along the winding path leading around the mountain and into the lower city don’t have much to do other than talk.

As soon as Leo Goldhorn walking next to 1313 opens his mouth, the changeling has no chance but to sigh internally.

“Bet it must be pretty hard, walking in the sun like this without your precious bodyguard slash servant carrying your armor for once.”

Okay, so I have no idea how Blueblood conducted himself during these sessions. If I were him, I’d smack this little shit over the head immediately. Judging by his looks Blueblood must be almost ten years older.

On the other hole, I have little to no experience with nobility. Leo’s cheekiness might stem from him never really being a subject to violence or danger. This can mean three things. One, he really has no idea about

physical confrontations. Two, he does, but he only attacks those of lower rank who can't defend themselves. It can't be legal to smush a noble's face even in self defense, even I know how lawmaking works and who has the final say in pushing things through. Three, neither of those but he knows that Blueblood can't punch him in front of Beacon.

"It's not like she was allowed to accompany me before," replies 1313 non-committally, drawing on what little he knows.

"True, but wouldn't that be great? That massive zebra plot jiggling in front of you, sweaty from a whole day of training-"

Oh, he's just a hormonal moron. Zamira should have him wrapped around her hoof within a week.

"-and most of all - she knows how to *obey*."

I would love to see her teach you how wrong you are, you horny twat.

"You have my permission to make her an offer she can't refuse. If you can top mine, that is," smirks 1313.

"Oh? How much are you- I mean," Leo chuckles sadistically, "How much is *your father* paying her?"

I have no idea.

"I guess you'll have to ask her and accept anything she asks for," bluffs 1313, "If it helps, she *does* tend to parade herself around me in hopes of rising from her servant status but one - she's not a unicorn and two - as if I'd cavort with *a commoner*."

"Hah, you have no idea what you're missing out on," Leo shakes his head, "Maybe I *will* offer her something you won't."

"Keep dreaming. She's loyal, professional, and now that I know you're interested in her, I might give her a raise so that she doesn't take on a different contract. If you want to see that striped plot in action, you might

want to sweeten the deal,” 1313 laughs, “And I’m not sure you can afford that but be sure to keep trying. I’m bound to enjoy the *lack of competition*.”

With a huff, Leo picks up the pace while grumbling to himself.

Hmm... hope I didn't overdo it. I owe it to Zamira that in case she exchanges one inbred twat for another, she'll at least get paid enough to afford her own house and sexy servants that she wants.

Ten hours, ten holes-damned hours of marching in full gear before Beacon stopped them to let them have lunch in the shade of one of many small groves dotting the landscape otherwise filled with rolling fields or meadows. Not that the trip so far was *all* bad, since after descending Canterlot mountain, everyone finally realized how much of an ordeal the march was going to be and left 1313 alone.

1313 opens the saddlebag Zamira prepared for him and pulls out a big bottle of something brown and sloshing. One raised eyebrow later, he puts it on the grass and finds two more things - a small piece of paper and a tiny box wrapped in a hoofkerchief. The paper turns out to be a brief note reading:

[“I might not know what exactly you’ll be doing but I know how military drills go back home. Having a real full meal would cause you more harm than good because I’m sure one of the sunstrokes is bound to make you carry stacks of bricks right after lunch. I packed you a bottle of water. The brown is just a food dye but it also makes it look like one of those easily digestible instant foods. Don’t worry, it’s not made from ponies. As for your real meal, I think it’s worth the risk but if you don’t return it or damage it in any way I WILL blow you up personally. That’s NOT a joke.”]

With utmost care, 1313 opens the small box which reveals a locket practically *brimming* with love. Inside, there’s a photo of two zebras - a mare and a stallion. And that’s all there is in the saddlebag, yet it’s more than enough for 1313. With the locket in his hoof, he levitates up the brown-stained bottle and starts sipping the lukewarm water.

“AMBUSH!” yells Platinum Heart out of nowhere, making everyone scramble for their weapons and helmets. In only a few moments, every member of the group is standing on all fours, their weapon floating nearby, and scanning the area.

“Well that was pathetic,” scoffs Beacon, “No formation, no coherence, only five *foals* standing each on their own. You are A UNIT!” he shakes his head, “Now, since I couldn’t afford to hire a circus to release wild animals on you, our ambush time will be spent by sparring, so split up into pairs and get going. Torchlight, go and slap Blueblood around a bit. Goldhorn, you start with Hayfield. Azure Sea, you go against Platinum. You’ll all be swapping later so that everypony can have a go at everypony.”

The combat practice begins and despite 1313 not being weighed down by a recent meal, the muscular unicorn currently beating him into the ground is far too much of a challenge.

“You still suck at fighting, I see,” laughs Torchlight as he disarms 1313 for far too many-eth time, “I guess relying completely on bodyguards makes one soft and complacent.”

“Not everyo- everypony... lives... at the gym...” with a hiss of pain, 1313 levitates his sword up again and swings at the bigger unicorn.

“True, but somepony supposedly from an alicorn bloodline should be an example!” Torchlight’s powerful swing knocks 1313’s sword on the grass again and the following shove makes the changeling follow suit, “Or maybe there isn’t as much to this whole alicorn thing as everypony thinks.”

“Leave my aunt out of this,” growls 1313.

1313 scowls, his telekinesis taking hold of the discarded sword and attempting an upswing which gets easily blocked by Torchlight who smirks.

“I mean, old age and senility must eventually catch up to alicorns as well...”

I’d pay good money to see you say that to Celestia’s face.

1313 fakes several angry swings, each easily blocked by clearly a far superior fighter.

Torchlight sneers and approaches 1313 while locking their swords against each other.

I could punch him and he likely wouldn't expect it, but even with my armor I'm pretty sure my hoof would break against that rock jaw.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," grunts 1313, blinking away sweat.

"Don't I?" whispers Torchlight, "They say that a changeling is inside the castle, running circles around your precious aunt and her guards. Pathetic."

They know about me? Zamira's theatrics at the ball mustn't have been enough.

1313 realizes that his shock must be readable even for a musclebound moron like Torchlight as the unicorn's grin only grows as he continues:

"The new anti-changeling guard alarms keep triggering and yet the princess hasn't found anything."

Keep triggering? I was at the castle only once...

"Or maybe whoever made those alarms just did a shoddy job," 1313 rolls his eyes.

"ARE YOU FIGHTING OR HAVING A DRUNKEN BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION?!" screams Platinum Heart, making both unicorns jump.

"F-Fighting, sir!" Torchlight salutes.

"Psychological warfare, sir!" says 1313, joining in the salute.

"Geez, Blueblood," Platinum Heart rolls his eyes, "If you were half as good at *anything* as you are at finding excuses then the princess wouldn't have to keep asking the Grandmaster not to kick you out every session."

Aaaand here comes the snickering from all around.

Great, now I'm feeling bad for her, because Blueblood really is the absolute potato everyone thinks he is. Well, time to outpotato him.

With a flash of his horn, the flat of 1313's blade smacks the back of Torchlight's plot, making the unicorn jump forward.

"See? It worked," 1313 smirks.

If anyone expected the recruits to have some time to rest after the combat practice, they didn't know Beacon. As soon as the recruits stewing inside their full armors through a late summer noon could barely telekinetically hold their swords anymore, their bodies were forced into service again because both paladins in charge ordered the reserves to begin the second half of the march.

However, with everyone now keeping to themselves and trying their best not to fall over and, admittedly, both the slower pace and gradually setting sun, the second part of the day was significantly more pleasant for 1313.

Eventually, their journey must be coming to an end because Beacon stops and points at a wall of trees spreading all the way to the east, near pitch black under the dim, late evening horizon.

"That is the Everfree Forest," says Beacon in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, "We'll venture a short distance in and then we'll set up camp. The place is dangerous at night, even the edge, so be on your guard. Platinum will be our source of light ahead to avoid showing to any enemy how many of us there are."

Soon, they're travelling through the northern edge of the forest guided only by Platinum Heart's glowing horn in the front.

"Why *are* we here, anyway, Grandmaster," asks Hayfield, him and Azure Sea being the two reserves who didn't pester 1313 whatsoever, "Unless it's

still classified.”

Covering their backs, Beacon replies without stopping scanning his surroundings for even a second.

“So far, you’ve travelled from your base into enemy territory, you got ‘ambushed’ on the way, and now you’re almost at your destination. Wherever your mission takes you, it won’t be a holiday destination and you might need to act quickly or remain vigilant. Torchlight, you’re staying here.”

“Grandmaster?” asks the unicorn.

“You won’t be camping together during the night. Let’s assume you had to take different routes into enemy territory and have to hide until enemies are less alert. You will be meditating through the night to remain vigilant and steel your mind against any potential influence.”

That’s why the forced march, training, and no actual rest. Staying awake is going to be a pain. For them, I mean. Wait, no. With this damn necklace I can’t shapeshift to turn my need to sleep off. Zamira’s locket will be invaluable here then.

“Since this is still a training exercise,” Beacon continues, “You will be within range to call for help in case of trouble. Let’s move.”

“Yes, Grandmaster,” Torchlight salutes and starts looking around for a good spot to settle overnight.

One by one, every member of the group is led into their respective area and left alone. 1313 can’t help noticing that he’s been led the deepest into the forest and pondering whether it’s just Beacon’s aversion to Blueblood or something else. On the other hand, he’s also the one ‘trainee’ who knows Everfree Forest albeit not in any great detail so he knows roughly what signs of trouble to listen for.

Hmm... Beacon said something about visiting a friend and yet he hasn’t mentioned it since. Perhaps on the way back?

Minutes drag on and turn into the first hour. Strangely enough, now that he's completely alone 1313 feels safer than at any point since crashing in Blueblood's bedroom. For the first time in over a week, he's in control of his situation. Well, mostly.

Hole, he could even try finding a cave and removing the explosive collar. It just might be his best option of getting out of this and since Blueblood might decide to blow him up in the end anyway, doing it here in a semi-controlled environment could be his only real chance.

Yet, he doesn't do it in the end. One, it would be loud and someone might come take a look. And two...

Two...

I know she's using me to get what she wants but... it doesn't feel like it's the only thing.

Zamira likes him and she *knows* he's a changeling. An infiltrator can sense these things easily, no matter how small. Returning to the hive, if there even still is a hive, doesn't seem entirely beneficial. The constant hunger, the missions, the ever present threat of being devoured by a higher rank, or just being recycled because the queen is in a bad mood and he didn't bring enough love from his assignment.

Maybe I just changed a metaphorical explosive collar for a real one.

With a jerk, he opens his eyes and realizes he nodded off.

He blinks in surprise. That shouldn't have happened. His ears perk up as he reaches into his saddlebag and pulls out Zamira's locket. The love inside it is immense and it spreads through his body like warmth seeping in as one lowers themselves into a bath.

With this level of love at his disposal, he shouldn't be feeling dizzy at all, and yet, even breathing is difficult without his eyes slowly closing. That's when it hits him.

There's something in the air.

Immediately, he pulls out a hoofkerchief in which the locket box was wrapped and turns it into a makeshift bandanna. It's not enough, not yet, but the adrenaline pouring through him now is keeping 1313 focused.

Water.

He can still hear a small stream bubbling in the distance. Beacon really did pick a perfect spot for this training. It's deep enough to provide danger yet close enough to the edge in case of something unmanageable, there's a source of fresh water nearby, and most wood and vines around can be used for makeshift field dressing in case of wounds.

He reaches the stream, has a drink, and dips his bandanna in it before rebinding it on his nose. The cold water helps clear his head and the wet cloth provides a slightly better insulation against the strange scent putting him to sleep.

A horrified scream in the distance pierces the stillness of the night, yet no hoofsteps or anything follow it. It was loud, it *should* have woken up the other recruits even if they fell asleep.

Another one, quickly cut off, in the same direction but a different angle.

Yeah, they're coming from the others.

Gritting his teeth, 1313 heads towards the last known location of Hayfield who was the one stationed nearest to him. The occasional screaming keeps him on his hooves despite him now being able to identify the strange scent in the air which keeps attempting to put him back to sleep.

To his surprise, when he reaches Hayfield, the unicorn is lying on the ground, spasming and occasionally weakly punching the air.

He's having a nightmare but he looks unharmed.

Hayfield screams again, making 1313 twitch. He shakes the unicorn who groans but his eyes don't open. He tries again to no avail.

Hmmm... if the others are in the same state, there's no reason to go and check up on them. Finding the source of the gas is more important.

It's risky. Having to deliberately breathe in the gas to know where it's coming from while fighting to stay awake is bound to be. To his shock, however, 1313 only needs to take a few steps before finding a tiny, thin, slowly burning incense stick hidden behind a stump of a broken tree. He sticks the burning end into the mud, extinguishing the scent almost immediately.

Meditate and steel your mind against potential influence. So this IS your test, Beacon.

1313 returns to his meditation spot and it takes only a few moments to find the incense stick responsible for his sleepiness. With it extinguished, the only thing ruining the peaceful night are the screams of the more annoying nobles who, in 1313's mind, can only benefit from lack of sleep and a sore throat. At least they'll shut up on the way back.

If only I could turn my ears off.

The scent returns but this time 1313 is ready. As he jumps up, he finds himself facing... a pony. Even his not fully changeling eyes are good enough to see in the dark, yet his brain is failing to understand what he's looking at.

It's an earth pony. The blood red, chewed-up, pointy, wide brimmed hat on his head doesn't allow space for a horn. From underneath it, 1313 can see strands of grey, aged mane. He's wearing a matching coat, not a natural coat but an actual article of clothing as ragged and faded as the hat, yet tightly bound around the almost unnaturally thin pony. Around his neck hangs a saddlebag covered in silver studs, its straps so tight it doesn't move at all as the pony takes a step towards 1313. Come to think of it, a saddlebag accessible from the front makes SO MUCH more sense for ponies than one hanging on the side of their barrel.

The two weird- weirdest things about him are what makes 1313's hair stand on edge. One - even at night he's wearing round, metal spectacles with pitch

black glass, completely blocking 1313's view of his eyes. Two - his right foreleg, at least the lowest third not covered by the coat, is... a mess. It looks like griffon talons but made of scorched, black flesh. He doesn't even limp or anything, though, so it can't be a crippling wound.

1313 levitates up his sword. The pony tilts his head and the corner of his mouth curls up.

The changeling isn't a fighter, that much must be clear to anyone, but this can't be anything other than another test.

The pony only takes a step back to avoid the amateurish wide swing of his sword and as the blade is passing in front of him, he catches it with his disfigured foreleg. Bright blue flame bursts out of the leg, turns green for a moment, and-

1313 groans and opens his eyes.

"Welcome back to the land of the conscious, Blueblood," he hears Beacon's voice and immediately sits up.

His internal clock catches up with the infiltrator and informs him that he's been unconscious for only roughly half an hour.

"AAH!" he yelps as he turns his head and finds the weird earth pony sitting on the trunk of a broken tree.

So it WAS Beacon's friend.

"First time seeing a witch hunter?" growls the earth pony.

"This is the first time *I* am seeing a witch hunter," Platinum Heart replies instead, "I doubt the prince had the opportunity."

1313 nods.

There are only the four of them in the small clearing surrounded by a shimmering golden dome which must be invisible from the outside because no one could miss it at night and 1313 had no clue it was nearby. A small fire pit is happily crackling in the center of the clearing being tended to by Platinum Heart.

“What is a witch hunter?” asks 1313, shifting position to be sitting with his back to the fire and facing both Beacon and the witch hunter.

The earth pony only grunts at him.

“Don’t be like that, Eis,” says Beacon in a suddenly surprisingly warm tone 1313 didn’t think the paladin grandmaster was capable of, “Fine,” Beacon rolls his eyes, “This grumpy old sod is Hufeisen, one of the last, if not the last, witch hunter. They used to be a... group of earth ponies trained to fight darkness like us paladins, although using vastly... different methods. I enlisted his help for tonight to test the mental resilience of my reserves and it seems like only you, Blueblood, passed.”

Hufeisen snickers with no following explanation.

“Hufeisen, that’s not a pony name, right?” asks 1313.

“Been neglecting your history and language studies, *prince*?” Hufeisen cracks an evil smile.

“It’s not a name from ponish, rather from the language of old Germaney,” explains Beacon, “Translated, it would mean ‘horseshoe’. Not that it particularly matters, since it’s not Eis’ real name anyway.”

Hufeisen shoots him a murderous glare which, to 1313’s surprise, makes Beacon look away and add:

“It’s a witch hunter thing, don’t worry about it. They traditionally used to make a pact with a demon for power and that leg is the mark left behind.”

“That doesn’t sound, uhh, safe,” comments 1313.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Hufeisen examines the twisted foreleg, “The demon has been purged from reality. If they weren’t I wouldn’t be here.”

“They make the pact early to weed out those who can’t handle the power. If they go nuts, they either get hunted down or the demon takes what’s theirs. If they fail to grow in power in time, the demon takes what’s been promised in the pact as well,” lectures Beacon, staring at 1313, “They summon one which can take the advantage of their weakness the most, be it laziness or greed, *prince Blueblood*,” he narrows his eyes, “or something entirely different.”

“The only way was to destroy the demon completely before your timer was up,” Hufeisen chuckles, “We didn’t have all the time in the world to train like these two lightbulbs,” he nods to Beacon and Platinum Heart.

“But you both protect Equestria, right?” asks 1313, growing more and more puzzled as to why he’s here.

“No,” growls Hufeisen, “They do.”

“Come on, Eis...”

“I helped you tonight for old times’ sake,” the witch hunter stands up, “You have your answers, and I’m expecting my wine. Say hello to thickest thighs for me,” he tips his hat to the paladins, stares at 1313 for a second through his weird shades, chugs something from a small vial he pulls out from his neck saddlebag, and as soon as he touches the golden dome surrounding the clearing he vanishes into thin air.

Beacon shakes his head.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” he looks at 1313, “Return to your post, Blueblood. It’s only a short way from here. I’m sure somepony of your intelligence and breeding can find their way.”

As 1313 stands up to leave, Beacon clears his throat and adds:

“And if I were you I’d spend some time thinking about how to craft a pair of earplugs or it’s going to be a long and irritating night.”

It’s late afternoon on Sunday when 1313 stumbles once again through the barred gate of Blueblood estate garden, only to see Zamira standing on guard by the door leading inside the mansion itself begin striding towards him.

He smiles and gives her his saddlebag, saying:

“Thank you. It’s all there.”

In a similar fashion, princess Celestia looks up from a stack of papers on her desk when she hears a high-pitched bell toll a quiet ‘ting!’ behind her.

“Grandmaster Beacon, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Pleasure might not be the right word. This is about Blueblood.”

Celestia groans, lowering her head on her desk.

“What did he do this time?”

“He passed this weekend’s training with flying colors.”

“What the-?” Celestia bolts upright, “I mean, that’s excellent!”

“No, not excellent. Let’s have a little chat.”

Author's Notes:

This was supposed to be half as long. Siiiiigh...

No, you don'T really need to remember the new characters. Or do you?

Dun dun dunnn.

Emergency infusion of cuteness is going to have to wait, because my notes are telling me that the next one is bugbutt, so back to wrtiting a history schoolbook.

Anyway, just like with creatures who eat too much fiber - the plop thickens.

2 chapters this week because I'm not sure how much time I'm going to have in the next two weeks due to work. I mean, at least I get paid for overtimes.

CH: 7/13 - Rend

Chrysalis would have never thought that fighting a warrior queen inside her own head would result in physical wounds to her body but hey, even a centuries old changeling queen could occasionally learn something new about herself.

It took some serious effort to regain a moderate amount of energy from woodland animals and the three changelings had to pause their trip south for a few days but now they're back on track with Chrysalis lying on the cart pulled by 68 and 96 again.

"That clearing looks suitable," says Chrysalis out of nowhere, transmitting a flash of her own vision into the heads of her two subordinates, "Stop there."

68 and 96 know better than to argue so they simply maneuver the cart over the uneven forest floor into a shade of a tree which their queen marked. As warriors, they're significantly resistant to the elements but even they must admit that at this time of the year it's unpleasantly hot even under the tree canopies.

"68, stay on guard. 96, go find water. Wash up, cool down, bring some, then swap with 68. I'm going diving."

"Yes, Your Majesty," they salute.

With an appreciative nod, Chrysalis assumes a position of a meditating griffon monk and closes her eyes. It probably won't have any effect on her, or at least any positive one, but if she's learned anything from her previous dives, it's that the most successful queens were the ones who tried something new.

Chrysalis finds herself hovering low over what looks like homogenous woodland stretching as far as the eye can see. Nothing seems to be moving but if this place wasn't connected to the next queen shade inside her head, she wouldn't be here.

Too bad I can't sense the links of anyone other than the queen shades themselves.

Eventually, she does spot a movement in the sea of green underneath and flies closer.

A changeling patrol. So, if the memory is based here then the changelings lived here before taking over the south. Damn, I wish it was possible to talk to Mandible for longer. I'm kind of lost as to how they got from here to mostly peacefully ruling the entire south of Equestria.

"As far as I know, we were pushed here by force," says a voice from behind which makes Chrysalis straight up jump.

"How did you-?!" she immediately activates all her contingency transformations, her body welling up with love much to the visible amusement of the bigger and broader, amber-maned queen with black carapace tinted with red.

"You didn't think that warriors are only born to ram our faces into enemy shield walls, did you?" the other queen chuckles, waving her foreleg around, "Fighting in a forest has its specifics, quite a lot of which are stealth-based," she takes a step towards Chrysalis who is still lowered and tense in a combat stance, "which you will fully absorb once you get rid of me. To be honest, it hurts to see how much useful knowledge was lost over time just so that the bloated hive mind could keep us 'alive'."

"So, how do we do this?" asks Chrysalis, not easing up for a second. So far, she's managed to dig only slightly into the shade's head and pulled out her name, "Queen Rend."

"Hmmm," Rend taps her chin, "How about a quick chat and then we get to the exercise, hmm? Warrior survival instinct is quite something, considering

our adaptability, so I can't exactly disappear for free even if I wanted to, unlike some other queens you've met already. Poor Venom. Mandible had the right idea to destroy the hive mind properly but she completely lacked the power to do so. Holes, I'm not sure even *you* can do it and we're only weak shades of the real thing."

"Do you have any idea what happened to the hive mind revenants?"

"They jumped out of your head, using hive links and killing the weaker changelings they jumped through outright. There are only two options, really - they either found a suitable enough changeling host in a safe place and they're changing them to suit their needs or they miscalculated their power, landed inside the wrong head, and starved to death already."

Hmph, I suspected that much.

"Yes, you did," Rend's smirk only grows.

"You must be irritatingly good at mind tricks to be able to tell what I'm thinking."

"Not exactly, Chrysalis. You just completely misunderstand what warriors are. Reading body language is just as much of a survival trait for us as reading minds is for you infiltrators. Only, you are used to doing so in a conversation while our observation skills are the sharpest in a fight. Right now, we're in my territory," Rend walks over and pats the smaller queen's head, making Chrysalis bare her teeth at her in response, "Now, now, we wouldn't be talking if I didn't see potential for the growth of our species in this."

"I brought down Mandible. Everyone knows us changelings have only grown in power throughout time, adapting to do more with less."

"See?" Rend's expression grows serious, "That's where I think you're wrong, and if you don't learn some sort of humility that *sticks* you'll die."

"You can't stop me."

“I am not talking about myself. Now let’s stop with the ovipositor measuring contest because the more you open your mouth, the more I’m starting to think that I overestimated your intelligence. Take a deep breath.”

To her own surprise, Chrysalis takes a deep breath. The knee jerk reaction was just an instinctive response to a presumed threat to her queenhood. A sign of...

... of insecurity.

After all, she has nothing to fear from Rend. She *is* vastly more powerful and she is inside her own body. What Rend is trying to make her realize is the difference between confidence and overconfidence. That’s all. She knows she won’t win a fight and yet she surprised and ambushed Chrysalis just to show her that there are many things she has to understand both about herself and about changelings as a whole.

“Better?” asks Rend.

Chrysalis looks her in the eyes with a stern expression and forces out a polite and factual:

“Yes. Explain what you meant by changelings not getting more powerful over time. From everything I’ve seen and experienced that is true. What makes you think it isn’t?”

“You started this spring cleaning because you knew something other queens didn’t. *Someone* within the hive mind believed that you were a queen who might not be a slave to the rage and said someone helped you keep your sanity. As you pushed through more and more memories, you learned that the rage wasn’t coming from us queens as you thought but was infecting us, forcing us to see enemies where they didn’t need to be, and in the end being amplified by us as we gave in. Correction, most of us. Venom was special and she could have become the most powerful queen ever and that’s why she had to die.”

“Then the question is - who helped me and where is the rage coming from?” Chrysalis states thoughtfully.

“Unfortunately, that’s where my usefulness ends. Warriors are very good at spotting enemies and allies, that’s our job. Sadly, we are nowhere as good at digging deep or influencing others. That’s your job.”

“Then what *did* you spot?”

“I just had a passing thought while watching history through your eyes without the corrupting influence of the true hive mind. The thought was - if there’s someone powerful enough to control other queens then why ARE there still other queens. You know we can be reborn, even if the process is exceedingly dangerous. Why would someone with enough power to influence *all* the other queens to a degree that shaped the entire history of our species wouldn’t simply get reborn and rule us instead?”

“Maybe the one influencing the hive mind isn’t a changeling but rather someone with extensive knowledge of our biology and mental magic? An alicorn, maybe?”

“Suspecting Scream, are we?” Rend shakes her head, “Possible, but I don’t think so. Scream has always been able to influence us through outside events and needs. I’m not ruling anything out but I think this threat is coming from inside the house.”

“So you believe one or more earlier queens were much more powerful than any other?”

“Congratulations, you got half of my suspicion right. Now try the second half. Hint - if it was one queen, why isn’t she ruling us?”

Chrysalis pauses.

“Someone is stopping her?”

“BINGO!” Rend claps, “With how dangerous our resurrection is, the process would be easy to foil. Simply influencing weaker queens, though...”

“Then you believe that changelings started out much more powerful than we are now, fell into a decline, and then rose up again?”

“Exactly-”

As Chrysalis blinks, Rend moves. When she opens her eyelids again, the warrior queen is in front of her, booping her nose before she can react.

A fraction of a second of confusion follows before a right hook from Rend sends Chrysalis backflipping into the air.

“-and you’ll have to face our past. The past which we don’t know *anything* about but which knows *everything* about us.”

Chrysalis shakes the concussion off only to be kicked from the side and sent onto the grass.

Rend is *perfectly silent*. How? Chrysalis has no idea. Even her own steps make the grass whisper and small branches crack so she can’t rely on her ears. The strange thing is that Rend’s blows are no stronger than those of a common pony Royal Guard.

What she *can* do is limit Rend’s access to her love just like she did with Mandible.

A mistake.

As she narrows her eyes to focus, Rend punches her right under her horn, scattering her thoughts into the breeze.

How is she unaffected-?

Oh crap, where is she?!

Chrysalis finds herself alone in complete silence or, to be accurate, surrounded only by natural noises of the forest.

She can sense Rend’s link, though, and tapping into it reveals-

-darkness?

A heavy mass lands on her back from above followed by a neck-cracking, vice-like grip twisting her body around.

Fine, time to burn love.

“Don’t bother,” the grip around her neck eases up but doesn’t vanish.

Confused, Chrysalis gathers herself only to realize that her neck is in a leg lock of Rend’s thick and powerful hind thighs.

“I know a lot of creatures who would pay good love to end up like this,” Rend’s hind legs tense up and make Chrysalis’ head wiggle, “Now, would you like to know how you lost?”

“Please, enlighten me before I waste a drop of my love and make you spread those legs so far behind your back even the filthiest whore in Manehattan would be jealous,” says Chrysalis sarcastically, “I mean, if you wanted to get laid so much after all those years, you could have just asked.”

“See? Using love is what I wanted to avoid because you’re going to need all the energy you can get, idiot. And, by the way, I might take you up on that offer because being *literally* fucked into oblivion does sound rather appealing. Anyway, since you seem to be enjoying yourself under me, why don’t I take my time while you put your mouth to good use?”

“Infiltrator queen’s *attention* is something to be earned, Rend. Get talking!”

“Fine, fine,” the warrior rolls her eyes with a laugh, “One, I knew you’d try to do the same thing that worked on Mandible first so I simply didn’t rely on love enhancements, rather on my knowledge of changeling weak spots. Two, infiltrator hearing means nothing when I can time my every movement with the natural rhythm of the forest or mimic it. Three, I knew you’d try to get into my head so I got into a position where you couldn’t see what I was doing or stop me. In short, I dropped down from a branch and closed my eyes at the right time. Gravity wins.”

“Smart,” admits Chrysalis. Clinging to her inborn sense of superiority really wouldn’t achieve anything here, “What would you have done, though, if I

just decided to use my love straight up and rip you in half?”

“I wouldn’t have fought you and, if I didn’t think I understood you well enough to believe you might be our hope, we wouldn’t be talking. You’d run into what’s waiting for you deeper into your memories and you’d *fail*.”

“...thank you,” Chrysalis mumbles.

“Oh my, did I hear that right?”

“From this position, I can bite half of your crotch right off.”

“Nevermind.”

“Good. Now that we understand each other, how about a history lesson. Why are we in... wherever we are?”

“The White Tail Woods. My mother Bloodlust led us here after zebras attacked Equestria from the south. The forests used to cover a huge chunk of the west before Las Pegasus and Vanhoover were founded so we had free access pretty much anywhere.”

“Hmm, if I understand it correctly, it was you who took over the south again, right? Before Mandible became queen and managed to hold it by force and threats.”

“Indeed, thanks to our ‘friend’ Scream, which neatly brings us to your second topic.”

“It’s really annoying that you can read me this well.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Rend smiles again, “Scream contacted me and told me that Celestia would be busy and ponies will be in no position to counterattack while we’ll be able to take over any part of Equestria we want other than Canterlot. She was very specific about that. I picked the more populated south where we were situated before and knew the lay of the land.”

“What did she concoct to make Celestia busy?”

“She said the sign would be ‘a long night’. I had no idea what it was supposed to mean but it turned out to be quite literal. One morning, the sun failed to rise and we took our chance. Infiltrators I sent out previously took out critical targets, we woke up warriors from hibernation, and the south was ours in a few days before ponies knew what hit them.”

“Did you find out what the long night was?”

“Oh yes, I had infiltrators in high places. Watch and see how the long night ended,” Rend bends down, puts her own horn to Chrysalis’, and the memory shifts.

It’s night, unsurprisingly.

Chrysalis finds herself standing on a balcony of Canterlot castle which can’t have changed much over the centuries even though the Canterlot city itself doesn’t exist. At least the upper city. What she knows as lower Canterlot set at the base of the mountain is smaller but already there. It’s pretty clear that the magic and technology required to put a castle halfway up a steep mountain definitely didn’t belong to unicorns of the time.

A white flash lights up the sky, blinding any potential onlookers without changeling eyes or protection and turning the night into a day for a brief moment.

“STOP, LUNA, PLEASE!” calls out a desperate voice, “I KNOW IT’S YOU IN THERE SOMEWHERE!”

“YOU. KNOW. NOTHING!” a shriek answers Celestia’s begging.

The black clouds above boil and a pillar of freezing starlight hits a rainbow marble which must be a protective barrier surrounding Celestia. The barrier clearly holds but the white alicorn is violently slammed into the ground by the torrent of force.

After the amount of energy which Chrysalis identifies as the biggest no-no she's ever seen disperses, Celestia is standing in the middle of a huge crater, unharmed.

“LUNA, THIS IS POINTLESS. I HAVE THE ELEMENTS! I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU AND YOU CAN'T HARM ME!”

Her only answer is a furious screech as reality around the black alicorn enveloped by an eerie silver aura begins to twist and bend.

“This seems a little one-sided,” comments Chrysalis.

“Not exactly,” replies the disembodied voice of Rend, “Celestia heavily underestimates whatever power Nightmare Moon possesses right abooooout now.”

A silver spear materializing next to Luna moves like lightning, leaving behind a trail of eye-hurting, shattered reality impossible to describe. Celestia's rainbow shield shatters and the white princess finds herself impaled through her chest and pinned to the ground, her eyes bulging in disbelief.

Luna lands in front of her, pure murder etched in her facial features.

“Aaaand now comes the evil monologue of a larva throwing a tantrum,” says Rend, “That's the unimportant part. Let me guide you.”

Chrysalis doesn't resist. At worst, she'll be able to examine the memory in close detail later but right now Rend is leading her to more important connections. As her surroundings shift, she finds herself in a castle hallway on the top floor, looking through the eyes of an invisible changeling infiltrator using everything he can to suppress all signs of his presence. No noise, no scent, completely invisible, heartbeat almost still, and his eyes are locked on two figures unaware of his presence.

One is Scream and one is a white, brown-maned unicorn wearing plate armor covered in golden sigils and sun symbols.

“How could she do this...?” asks the unicorn in a cracked voice.

“Hmph,” Scream frowns, “and after all this time of me teaching her the secrets of magic.”

“You have to stop her!” the unicorn grabs Scream and shakes her.

“Nightmare is possessing Luna. The first thing it would do would be to make sure Luna is protected from all those able to stop her. The only reason Celestia is still alive are the Elements. The moment I show up, all her alarms will ring like a cathedral during a solstice. However...” Scream pauses and shakes her head, “No, that’s too dangerous.”

“What? WHAT?”

“I can scribe you a spell scroll. If you manage to get down there and use it against Luna unnoticed it should weaken her enough for Celestia to be able to stop her. The problem is that I don’t know if the spell is enough to protect you from her. We’re facing a literal GOD here and our only surefire weapon is the Elements.”

“I...” the unicorn hangs his head, “I’ll do it.”

“If something happens to you, it will break her...” says Scream, her voice filled with concern.

“If Luna wins, it’s over for all of us,” he shakes his head, “Eternal night? Crops will die, the world will freeze. Luna was talking about it as if it was just... just about appreciation of stars and such. Celestia and I have been together for more than a lifetime and we’ve been blessed with times most ponies can only dream of. This is my duty to her and to the land she built from the ashes of warring tribes.”

Scream closes her eyes and a piece of parchment slowly materializes in front of her, burning symbols appearing all over it.

“Can you activate it?”

He examines the scroll for a moment and nods.

“Then do your duty.”

With a quiet pop of teleportation, the unicorn vanishes.

“You had a pony lifetime with her while she took an alicorn’s lifetime away from me...” growls Scream as she walks out on the balcony and looks down at the two glowing dots at the base of the mountain.

Of course, Rend’s infiltrators are already watching Luna and Celestia from as close as they can, which admittedly isn’t *too* close because the area near the crater is so filled with magic they’d barely be able to breathe if they got closer but they can see and hear enough.

They can see Celestia’s eyes go wide as the unicorn materializes a short distance behind Luna. Her mouth opens into a scream as the unicorn’s horn lights up and the floating scroll disintegrates.

Luna catches on, turns around, and gets hit by a beam of burning energy incinerating everything in the area with the exception of Celestia and the unicorn himself. The released shockwave rips distant trees out of the ground and shatters glass windows all over lower Canterlot.

The memory wobbles as several of the observing infiltrators get knocked out but the few in good enough hiding places quickly resume watching so that they can eventually inform their queen residing far away through a network of contacts all over Equestria.

Luna’s flesh has been mostly seared off, leaving behind visible bones and chunks, and yet the alicorn is standing, magical power swirling around her.

“NO!” Celestia screams.

Luna only flicks her horn, her mouth ripped open creeping into a skeletal grin.

It’s a vibration more than a strike of an invisible force which, in a barely registered instant, smears the unicorn all over the scenery like a popped water balloon.

“MONSTER! YOU ARE A MONSTER! I THOUGHT YOU WERE STILL MY SISTER BUT YOU ARE NOTHING BUT AAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRR-” Celestia’s yell devolves into a furious screech as the Elements manifested as jewels adorning her body catch fire and pour all their energy into Celestia’s horn.

A simple flash of light later, Luna is gone without a trace and the sky begins to brighten. The jewels marking the presence of the Elements are gone, and Celestia finds herself sobbing in the middle of a circle of inert smooth stones, each bearing a strange symbol.

Through the ears of the infiltrator in the castle, Chrysalis can hear Scream’s quiet laughter:

“Face your own rage and darkness, your wannabe pure twat. Your lover is dead, you lost your prided self-control, you killed your sister, the Elements now reject you, and before you realize what happened, your ponies will be hanging in cocoons all over the south. I *will* make you unlock the Silent Quarter for me.”

With those words, the memory fades.

Still pretty much sitting on Chrysalis’ face, Rend gives her time to breathe. The infiltrator queen, though, frees her forelegs from under Rend’s expansive, muscular booty, and pokes her with one.

“I need to think about this,” says Chrysalis, “Turn around so that I can show your fat ass the reward it wanted.”

“Oh my, aren’t I the lucky one,” Rend snickers, “No wonder you don’t exactly have suitors queuing up with an attitude like that.”

“Don’t push your lu-mmmppgh!”

“Did I hear something?” Rend muses, “Nah, must have been just a disobedient royal plot cleaner.”

“HELP ME!”

As if through jelly, Chrysalis runs towards the voice.

She knows her daughter is dead. She knows she died because Chrysalis ignored her call for help. And she knows she won't be able to save her.

“This is your fault, you failure of a queen,” hisses an unknown voice, *“All their deaths are!”*

Chrysalis' mind explodes with screams of all the changelings hit by the Canterlot love explosion. Squeaks of weak drones splattered immediately against the nearest surfaces, shocked yells of infiltrators ripped apart from the inside by their love reserves spontaneously igniting, and roars of warriors unable to bear their insides boiling from the burning love unable to tear the tough carapaces quickly.

Chrysalis wakes up with tears in her eyes. In panic, she mentally reaches out to the two hive links near her. Both changelings immediately take their place next to her and only blink in surprise as the queen pulls them both into a hug.

1988, 9999: 8

As promised, when the sun came up, 1988, 9999, and the two warriors gave every single drone and Silent a full physical, revealing a total sum of injuries that could probably fell a dragon. Each one had a broken carapace, that one's given, but some have been dealing with their actual bones as well. Why changelings have both endoskeleton as well as an exoskeleton was beyond the knowledge of anyone involved. Necrotic flesh was the norm, but thankfully, changeling adaptability limited the spread so it didn't infect anywhere important. 1988 never considered himself a surgeon but the ability to transform his hooves into claws and operate a knife borrowed from the kitchen with a degree of precision that the mouth simply didn't offer did tons to limit the invasiveness of the 'cleaning' process.

In the end, the drones were left with a few more goop-filled holes each but 1988 could feel it, the BIG thing - the drain on their love went down immensely. After some rest, the drones scampered off to help ponies again. After all, none of them were hurt enough to stop working, even though now that 1988 knew the only injury that *would* stop a drone from working would be a broken neck, it did little to alleviate his conscience. He realized one important thing during this whole medical ordeal - his whole hive knew so *little* about the drones.

HOWEVER, right now there's one drone he could really live without, even though it brought him the most critical part for the plan he's been hatching for a while.

Bounce bounce bounce bounce!

"9999, can you stop that guy?"

"MY PICTURE OF THE WORLD IS USEFUL!" 13415 keeps bouncing up and down, its usually serious demeanor completely gone as 1988 studies the map it drew.

“Come on, 1988, it’s just happy. Not everyone got off on the right hole with the ponies so some of us have to take what we can get,” 9999 defends the second highest ranked drone around.

“I DREW ALL THE LITTLE LINES AND SQUIGGLES! THEY’RE IMPORTANT!”

“I knooooow,” moans 1988, giving 9999 an annoyed glance, “If I give it a reward, will it go away? Or at least stop?”

“DEPENDING ON THE REWARD!” 13415’s demeanor changes immediately from excited to ‘attentively listening while still bouncing up and down’.

“That sneaky little bastard knows exactly what it’s doing,” 1988 facehoofs.

“Yep,” sighs 9999, “Alright, that’s enough of that, 13415. The map is important, we understand, now let 1988 do his thing.”

“Aaaand the reward?” asks 13415.

“I won’t feed you to 8622,” scowls 1988, “It looks to me as if you’ve got energy to spare.”

“Hey, you promised you wouldn’t be mean anymore,” 13415 finally stops hopping and gives 1988 a betrayed look.

“That’s a two-way street. You don’t give me a headache, I don’t use parts of you as bait for nightmarish monsters. You’ve already failed the first part. I’m allowed to be mean.”

“Grmmm...” 9999 glares at him.

“Just *a little* mean. You know, only *threatening* unspeakable violence, not actually going through with it,” 1988 explains with a roll of his eyes.

“Oh,” 13415 ponders his words and brightens up instantly, “Hey, that’s fair. 9999 was totally right, you’re a really nice infiltrator, 1988!”

“I repeat - if I thank you, will you go away and let me figure this out?”

“What are you doing anyway?” asks 13415 in an excitedly curious way that makes 1988’s eye twitch.

“I’m thinking of a way to get the cocooned ponies to civilization before something bad happens to them. From 9999’s overview of the love situation of you drones I can see we’re slowly improving, especially now that you’re not practically *leaking* love from all the barely patched up holes and cuts.”

“Thanks for that!” 13415 beams, “I’ve never felt better in my life.”

“I doubt you’re the only one,” mutters 1988, “This makes me suspect that our lack of love in the hive might have not been due to raw consumption but more due to not doing any real... maintenance.”

“When it’s easier to eat the wounded or just recycle-” 9999 is stopped by 1988 patting its head.

“I know. Now I know,” is all 1988 says before resuming his focus on the map, “This is going to take a week at this pace, at least. How can we split up for a week? They can’t feed from the cocoons anymore, so how much love can we really spare? We’d have to hibernate a few guys... but then we’ll be getting even less love here...”

“If you give me a copy of the map and a few drones, I think I can provide a stable hive mind for a small group,” offers 9999.

“You nearly collapsed after a few *hours*,” 1988 shakes his head, “With the amount of changelings this is going to require, that’s out of the question. Besides, you’ve done well here and I want to use the right changeling for the right thing, no matter the rank. It’s a novel idea but let’s give it a shot. No, for safety reasons and to swap serving as hive mind nodes, both 8622 and 9013 will have to go.”

“They can’t hurt the monsters,” objects 9999.

“We’re in the north. They can fight off a black bear, timberwolves, or any other wildlife if needed. Good point, though. So, we’re going to need both carriers *and* supernatural security...”

“The Silents can carry three cocoons each, provided we can make a proper harness. Other than one of them, they don’t seem to be improving in their heads but they won’t panic in a tight situation which I can’t say about us. Although I’d like to keep the one who potentially seems to be getting better here,” replies 9999.

“Sounds good. So, two Silents, two warriors, but still a double-digit amount of pony-sized cocoons which will break if they drag them on the ground.”

“The camp ponies have those huge carts for tree trunks stationed around our shiny reward spot. Maybe we could borrow one?” offers 13415.

“I’ll ask Sawtooth later. Wait, no. Let’s not make two versions of the plan. 13415, go do that right now. Sawtooth should still be in the camp’s office building this early.”

“On it!” 13415 salutes and bolts away.

“Hmph, no matter how I look at it, we’re still short on love. If we send out the drones who keep bringing in the least with the cocoon group, we’ll still end up exhausted. Without draining some of you drones and forcing you into hibernation it won’t work.”

“I can’t ask the guys to do it. You heard them last night. I’ve never seen them so happy- no, that’s not right,” 9999 pauses.

“It didn’t look like that to me,” 1988 shrugs, “They look more excited whenever one of them wins the chance to hug the bug zapper.”

“No no no, you don’t understand. This... this is important that I say it right,” 9999 shakes its head, “It’s easy to be ecstatic about... anything, really, when you only have this exact moment to live, when you can be eaten in the next second. Yesterday... they were happier than ever because... because they were starting to believe they might get to... live? To

maybe enjoy tomorrow what they have now as well?" 9999 kicks the ground in frustration and growls before sighing and saying, "I wish I was able to say it in a way that makes sense."

"You're making too much out of this. We just need one or two to go into hibernation until we get some love from the ponies again because we're going to have to give almost all we have to the cocoon group."

"That's not how they'll see-" 9999 looks at the patch of grass it kicked out, "If I was an infiltrator with proper brain and words I'd know how to say it right. I-" it pauses and blinks, "Wait! Hibernate *me*!"

"What? No! I need you the most out of all of them."

"No, you don't," 9999 shakes its head, pleading, "I can sense it. That eye trick is making me use up more love, my head's been all weird since I had to hold the hive links together too and you can't patch that up with a knife. Pleasedon'ttry. *I am* the one using up more love than any other drone here *and* I haven't been bringing any in since I had to keep planning and thinking all the time. You have to stay here to manage everything anyway so you don't need me. Have the guys whom the ponies like stay here, hibernate me, and fill up all the others who will go away. Yesterday, a high rank, you, gained a tiny amount of their trust, something *they* thought could never happen. Don't ruin it, please."

1988 measures the small drone looking up into his eyes with equal parts determined and desperate expression.

"If you really think it's going to mean *this much* to them," the infiltrator shrugs, "I mean, it *is* going to be only for a day or two, hopefully. We're surprisingly stable and if we didn't have to do this we'd be gradually filling up."

To his surprise, 9999 slams into him, wrapping its forelegs around his slim frame.

"Thank youuuuuuu!"

Short time later, 1988 looks over the assembled changelings.

“Everyone, this is going to be dangerous but we have to do it. Of course, we could simply suck the cocooned ponies dry and bury them afterwards but I want all the good points we can get in case we get revealed at the wrong time. That means we have to make sure the ponies return to civilization *unharm*ed. The closest major town is Saint Hoofsburg to the northeast but it will take you at least a week to get there and back *and* that’s assuming you maintain a pretty sharp pace. The more realistic guess is closer to two weeks.”

“Quesshun!” 57999 raises its hoof and quickly swallows a piece of bark, “Question, I mean.”

“Yes?”

“Why can’t we return them back to Riverside? We took longer to get here but the map you showed us had fewer of the squiggly lines we have to avoid *and* it didn’t look much longer of a trip.”

“Good question-” 1988 nods.

“Woop woop!”

“Now shut up so that I can answer it!”

One does not simply defeat drone excitement, though.

“...woopwoop...”

1988 narrows his eyes before giving up and continuing.

“Our trip from Riverside took longer because we moved at a slow pace and without a clear direction. Plus, the queen was... unwell for some reason, probably because she got badly hurt during the invasion or something. As for why we can’t return the cocoons to Riverside - we don’t know in what shape the town is. If the worst comes to worst, the town will still be

abandoned and if we leave the cocoons the ponies will be too exhausted to do anything and they might starve. The second possibility is that the town will be swarming with guards which would mean safety for ponies but a threat to us. Yes, we are losing our potential bargaining chip but I *don't* want to be negotiating a hostage situation in the first place. Understood?"

Nod nod nod.

"Good. Now, we'll be splitting into two groups. 8622, 9013, AND 13415 will be leading the transport group," he smirks as 8622 shoots the jaw-dropped drone a frown but appreciates that 9013 doesn't seem to be bothered by it, "Warriors, you're going to be periodically swapping your role as hive mind nodes as well as providing security from wildlife. Drones, you'll be pulling the cart Sawtooth agreed to lend us. In case of an attack from those weird horror things, obey the warriors. Only you might be able to harm those but 8622 and 9013 know how to fight both single as well as a unit and can instruct you how to do it so that none of you get eaten. And you two, mark this down," he nods to the warriors, "Drones aren't chitin shields, emergency rations, or *acceptable casualties*. You do everything you can to keep them alive. If you have a problem with it, feel free to give a full report to 156 and 387 if we ever see them again. 13415, you're responsible for the drones. That means making sure they don't mess around, don't wander off, don't jeopardize the mission in any way, and *obey*. Got it?"

"Meep!" the newly promoted commanding drone keeps shaking.

9999 walks over to 13415 and pats its head.

"One more step towards the high score, buddy," it smiles.

"...meep..."

"If you don't panic, you'll do well," 9999 looks at the other drones, "If a single one of you causes trouble for 13415, unintentionally or even by not doing your best to help it, no shiny for you anymore. Ever!"

A unified gasp of horror passes through its audience.

As it returns to 1988's side, the infiltrator resumes talking.

"With that out of the way, I've decided that the drones who have been getting the most love recently will stay here to help us recover because we'll be giving you the vast majority of our energy reserves. So, who stays here - 36658, 57999, 17070, 20100, and 9999," he mentally pokes the deaf drone who is unsure what's going on but feels that it's important, "However, we don't have enough love so we'll have to hibernate some of our members."

There it is. The almost imperceptible freezing passing through all the drones. 9999 was right. They all know who's the first on the chopping block in every situation.

That's how it begins. Hibernation, then getting eaten because there's never enough love to wake up someone as unimportant as drones. For drones, hibernation IS death.

"And that's going to be me," 9999 steps up, raising its voice, "I'm a drain on our love right now and I haven't been bringing much in. Just like the drones on the road will be listening to *everything* 13415 says, the guys left here will obey 1988. Okay?"

Nod nod nod.

9999 returns to its place by 1988's side.

"Alright, we'll start with the love transfer unless anyone has questions," the infiltrator stares at everyone.

"I do," 8622 says, "Any plan on how to give the cocoons to ponies?"

"No," 1988 shakes his head, "I've never been in these parts before so I have no idea how things work here. You'll have to improvise once you get there. The important part is that they get there alive and as healthy as possible."

8622 nods.

“Then let’s do this,” 1988 turns towards 9999 and puts his horn to the drone’s.

9999’s carapace loses its healthy sheen, revealing hair-thin cracks, and once the drone slowly folds on the ground, its eyes close, its forelegs cross on its chest, and hind legs bend at the knees.

The mouths of the watching drones wibble but no one says anything. Gradually, 1988 approaches 36658, 57999, 17070, 20100, and drains *almost* every drop of love from them, redistributing everything to the group about to leave.

Since the cocoon group left, 1988 has been measuring his love reserves with utmost care. Unlike the warriors or much less the drones, his keeping the hive mind together is more a reflex not requiring that much energy. Still, if he fails, the trouble could prove fatal for everyone left here.

Maybe I could chat up some of the ponies left in the camp?

“Urk, bluh!”

The infiltrator looks around at the source of the noise, revealing 20100 biting off a clump of grass, chewing it up, swallowing, then waiting for a few moments with a thoughtful expression, and then throwing up.

“For the love of holes, please don’t tell me you’re experimenting with eating like a pony. I had enough trouble explaining the bark eater duo to ponies,” 1988 rolls his eyes.

“Nope,” 20100 shakes its head, “I’m just trying to make a drawy thingy.”

“Like... a pencil? You’d need coal for that, I think, not grass.”

“No, I’m allowed to take as much burnt wood as I want from the campfire. I meant the thing you draw *on*.”

“Paper. From grass?”

“Yup, I dug through the hive mind a bit and I found out that ponies used to make scrolls out of some water plants. We don’t have that here so I’m trying grass.”

“Do you mean papyrus? From water reed?”

“Dunno, maybe?”

“Why do you want it anyway?” asks 1988.

“You know how Magic Lantern showed me how to make pictures move, right?”

“No?”

“9999 didn’t tell you?”

“I didn’t ask about what you did while I was gone. You were healthy and regaining love, that’s all I needed.”

“Oooh! Wanna see?”

“Sure, why not?” 1988 shrugs.

20100 rushes away and quickly returns with a small stack of leaves with a crude depiction of a drone. Crude not because of the lack of skill of the artist but because of the material. Coal and wide leaves isn’t the best medium. The drone examines its ‘moving pictures’ and frowns.

“Awww... it’s all smudged. I swear, it was much better when it was fresh.”

“I see, you were trying to make a movie scene,” 1988 nods, “And you left this stack of leaves in a wet place, right?”

“Yeah! I got a pretty sweet hiding spot.”

“Ookay. I think I might have some pointers for you that might improve the quality of your ‘drawings’.”

“I’m listening.”

“One, screw papyrus-”

“Neat. How do I do that? Do I twist it or... nevermind, I’d forget anyway. Can I ask you again once I make some?”

1988 facehoofs.

“Poor choice of words on my side. You can get much better material than this papyrus-like grass mess. We’re in a forest, and real paper is made from sawdust.”

“Hey, there’s a bunch of that all over the place!”

“Exactly. Go help Hacksmith or someone else and they’ll give you some.”

“I’ll totally do my best to remember that!”

“Tip two - sharpen a burnt stick, it will make much clearer lines then just grabbing a random chunk from the campfire and drawing with it.”

“That’s important!”

“Yes, yes, it is,” 1988 nods.

“Hi, cooking buddy,” Swirling Ladle notices 17070 approaching her, “Are your ears better?”

“Umm, I can’t hear you, miss Ladle but good morning to you too!” the drone smiles at her.

Ladle takes a quick break from washing the dishes left after lunch just to pat 17070’s head.

“Do you want a ride?” she lowers herself down. To her surprise, 17070 shakes its head.

“I want a pot,” it points at the big metal tub filled with water and dishes.

“I can’t give you one. We’re tight on supplies right now,” she shakes her head.

17070 takes a moment to think about what the shake could have meant.

“Ah!” it blinks in realization, “I don’t want yours. I want to make one,” it beams with pride, “I don’t think just a goop one would work and I can’t make metal, though. Is there something else you can make a pot of?”

“Ooooh!” Ladle nods and can’t help smiling as the drone’s expression lightens up. Something about these critters’ eagerness just has this potential to brighten one’s mood. She points down at the ground and digs out a hoof full of dirt, “This isn’t the right kind-” she pauses, “This is going to be difficult to explain without words.”

“Soil?” asks 17070.

Ladle shakes her head, first pointing at her tub, then pulling out a bowl filled with water and pouring it over her hoof.

“Soil and water?”

“Yes,” Ladle nods but raises her foreleg to retain the drone’s attention, “but there’s more,” she points at the small hole in the ground, splashes a little bit of water in there, digs out more, and finally molds a small piece of mud into a hoof-sized, bent disc before pointing at the firepit.

17070 blinks, confused. Clearly, there are more steps to the whole process than it thought.

“Make a pot from water and soil, then... use fire for something?” it tries its best to interpret the gestures.

“Who’s a smart colt- filly- critter,” Ladle nods and pats 17070 again who nuzzles her underhoof and runs off without any further explanation. Ladle just shrugs and returns to her dishes, “I’m not sure if it’s even possible to make a pot from random mud but we’ll see.”

By the time 17070 returns, she's already started working on the ingredients for dinner. The smaller fireplace meant for cooking is happily crackling under the cauldron filled with what's about to be the usual vegetable stew. To Ladle's surprise, the drone presents a hoof-sized cup clearly made of mud but with a strange, green sheen to it. Tapping on it reveals that it's surprisingly sturdy, not even on the level of clay pottery but it's not crumbling straight up, so she lowers the edge of the cup into water and carefully rubs a bit of the mud off.

"Hmm, okay," she raises the cauldron up a few notches on its holding metal frame to make space underneath, and puts the cup near the fire, "Now let's let it dry and see what happens," she tells 17070 who is simply observing her, "I'll be stumped if this works but stranger things have happened," she points at her eye, at 17070, and then at the cup before resuming chopping vegetables.

17070 was told to watch the cup.

17070 watches the cup sit there.

17070 watches the cup start to sizzle.

17070 watches the cup catch fire.

17070 watches the cup crumble into dust.

17070 whimpers.

Swirling Ladle faces it as it points at the fire.

17070 wibbles at Ladle with drooped ears. It's super effective!

"Awww!" she rushes over and scoops the drone into a hug. The flow of affection coming from her does wonders to improve 17070's mood immediately, "Don't worry about it. I- you can't hear a word I'm saying anyway," she shakes her head and scratches the drone behind the ear.

Why is our goop so flammable?

“I’M A DUMMY!” blurts out 17070, starting to wiggle out of Ladle’s hug until she lets it go, “I’ll be right back.”

When it returns, 20100 is with it, saying:

“Hello, Miss! 17070 said it wanted me to, umm, interpret. By the way, is there a bag around which no one is using? I need it for wood shavings.”

“Sure. We have a bunch of those already that we use to help light fires. They’re around the back,” she points at the office building, “Of course, you have to clear any supply questions with Sawtooth.”

“Neat!” 20100 beams, “Now, 17070 wants to know what it did wrong with its... cup, you say?”

“It’s possible that nothing,” Ladle shrugs, resuming her chopping as she talks, “I’m no expert but the general idea is to make a shape from water and a specific kind of soil which makes clay, I think, and finally bake it in the right kind of oven with even heating.”

“So adding our goop because the mud kept crumbling wasn’t the best idea,” says 20100 after exchanging glances with 17070.

“Umm, probably,” Ladle ponders 17070’s last accident, “You seem to be making things a little... explosive. Wait, I’ve got an idea!”

Two heads lock onto her, one of them eagerly listening and one eagerly... being eager.

“Go ask Keen Eye, one of the two security guards. The unicorn. He has survivalist training and he assessed the surrounding area with Oversight when we first arrived. He might know if there’s a place here where you could dig out some useful mud. At this time of day, he should be assessing the state of our hardware.”

“Thank you!” is a perfectly synchronized answer from two mouths.

“Aaaaand they’re both gone,” she shakes her head, watching them run off like dogs chasing a thrown stick, “It’s so refreshing to see this much

excitement for everything.”

Night has fallen on the camp and the ponies are once again observing their daily campfire routine. This time, however, all changelings are assembled in their small campsite, sitting in a tight group in front of 1988.

“Report,” he says, adding a hive link component to the order so that 17070 can hear it.

“I got sawdust!”

“I made pots!”

“I made goomy lings!”

“I made... even more goomy lings.”

“Oookay, I’m not exactly sure what to make of that,” 1988 pauses, realizing that he, in fact, has absolutely zero clue about how to deal with drones beyond giving them orders, “First, any problems?”

“I don’t know how to make paper out of the sawdust.”

“My pots keep catching fire!”

36658 and 57999 exchange looks.

“We have *a lot* of goomy lings.”

“Did you give some to the ponies?” asks 1988.

“Yup, the mean medicine lady wasn’t as mean today,” 36658 nods.

“Good,” 1988 nods, “Now for your orders. Our remaining Silent will be guarding 9999 here but since both our warriors are gone, we have to set up a patrol schedule.”

“Why?” asks 20100.

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

“Weren’t we supposed to be protecting the cocoons?” 20100 continues,
“Now that they’re gone, why would we be patrolling?”

“Invulnerable nightmarish monsters ring a bell?”

“Oh...” 20100’s ears droop, “Sorry.”

“You’re going to have an excellent opportunity to make up for your forgetfulness-”

Gulp.

“-by taking tonight’s watch.”

“Phew...” 20100 wipes its forehead.

“Did you think I was going to eat you?”

“Yes- I mean, no- I mean, which answer won’t get me munched?” 20100 looks up at 1988 with genuine fear in its eyes. Without moving, the other drones in the unorganized huddle suddenly feel far too away.

“The honest one,” says 1988 firmly.

“Then, uhh, yes.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Umm, no. Umm, sorry.”

“You trust 9999 and it trusts me.”

“And it’s hibernating already.”

1988 takes a deep breath to calm down.

“The better you do at gaining love the sooner I’ll wake it up,” he says, trying to be as non-threatening as possible, “Now, I’ll mark your patrol route on the hive mind map. Here.”

20100 winces in pain. Too little love, too much detail for a drone.

“...ow ow ow...”

“This is the simplest I can make it,” says 1988, “If you can’t do it, I’ll task someone else with it.”

“...no, no, I’ll do it...” whispers 20100, “...what do I... do if I see something mean?”

“Umm, you can have my pot if it helps,” peeps 17070, “I managed to make a pretty sturdy one in the end... just stay away from any fire. It might help you protect your noggin, I made it big enough.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” says 1988, much to the surprised gasps of the drones which he decides to ignore, “What? Warriors sometimes *do* prepare armor beforehoof for cases where they might not have enough love for durability enhancements. The small loss of mobility is still better than getting crippled by a glancing blow.”

“You mean I can make goop armor?” 17070’s eyes go wide.

“If you figure out a way to stop making it explode then we might use that.”

“Woowooooow...” 17070 keeps staring blankly ahead, clearly in shock, mouthing, “I’m still useful...”

“You know what? I’ll come with you tomorrow and we’ll try to make a more polished version of a helmet, okay?” 1988 can’t help feeling a little guilty at seeing 17070 gradually come to terms with not inevitably getting *recycled*.

“Oooh oooh oooh!” 20100 bounces up to 1988, “Can you help me with making paper too? I’ll make you your own moving picture.”

“You know what? Do your job right and I just might,” 1988 gives it a smug smirk.

20100 smacks its hoof against its head.

“17070, GIVE ME THAT POT!”

“It can’t hear you,” comments 1988, immediately shutting off his hive link right before-

“17070, GIMME THAT POT! I GOTS PORTALLING TO DO!”

Author's Notes:

A new arc begins for the logging camp changelings!

Will their good deed be rewarded?

Will the rangers and paladins Celestia sent to Riverside after events involving Half-Hearted Fury make an appearance?

Is there a chance to cook a portal into the dreamscape?

But, most importantly!

Will 9999 wake up from hibernation on its own, even further solidifying its position as Drone Jesus?

65536: 13

Nighttime in Canterlot is almost over and so is the shift for Nightguards without their own lodgings in the city who met up earlier to have early morning dinner and a few drinks before returning to the castle. As they head up the many flights of stairs, their conversation revolves around the food they ate recently.

“No offense, but I’d take chineighese over any traditional Hollow Shades cuisine,” Pink Sunset shrugs.

“I will bite you!” Gloom hisses at him.

“I can understand local pride and whatnot but you have to admit it’s an acquired taste at best,” Sharp Biscuit tries to avoid this turning into yet another culinary lecture from Gloom.

“Race traitor!”

“Whoa there, Gloom. Let’s not go crazy,” Night Hunter joins the ‘discussion’.

“My grandma would make you a blood pudding you’d *never* forget,” grumbles Gloom.

“Show of hooves - fruit bats?” Sharp gives her a smug look when every present Nightguard barring one but including Gloom quickly raises a hoof, “Good. Now, what does our resident vampire bat have to say about grandma’s blood pudding?”

“Overrated,” Steel Glimmer shrugs.

“Why, you tattooed-?!”

“Gloom, you’ve never been to the Griffon Empire, have you?” Glimmer calmly shoots her down.

“No...”

“Those guys know how to work with giblets,” Glimmer’s wings perk up, “Hey, how about I order some proper meat next month from this one amazing shop in Manehattan? We can do some grilling on the castle roof.”

“Only if you want a weather patrol raining on your parade, literally,” Sharp shakes his head, “The east training grounds should be okay, though.”

“Great, that settles it.”

“Just don’t go crazy with it, Glims,” says Sharp, “I must admit I’m not big on meat either. Can I plus one, though?”

“Yeah, sure. Who?”

“I’m thinking Darky.”

“That means no alcohol, though,” says Night Hunter *immediately*, betraying a previous experience with the mare in question, “I don’t want to have to pry her off of myself again.”

“Duly noted,” Sharp nods, “But I think this time she won’t-” he freezes and quickly raises his foreleg.

They’ve reached the top floor of the castle, namely the Nightguard barracks. At this time of the earliest morning light, the castle is almost deathly silent other than the kitchens they passed on the way. However, the enchanted studs on Sharp’s armor send a chill down his spine.

The rest of the Nightguards, while slightly tipsy after a few post-shift drinks, immediately go silent, completely focused on their surroundings.

“Commander?” whispers Gloom, all bad blood over Hollow Shades food forgotten instantly.

“Magic directly ahead. The barracks door. Not Luna’s,” replies Sharp, “Get in position, standard entry procedure.”

“65536?” Gloom gasps.

Sharp scowls.

Of course that such a critical location would be stuffed with protective spells but Sharp’s armor is attuned to all of that otherwise he would never get a moment of peace while inside the castle. The spell on the door, whatever it may be, is fresh and from an unknown source.

Night Hunter steps right in front of the door. As a wing razor user, he’s strong enough to use the heavy variant which isn’t just a blade on the edge of the wing for both aerial and close combat, but a thick, sharpened sheath. With a flick of his wing, a set of lightweight metal sheets slide out, covering his entire wing and turning it into a shield. Sharp, Gloom, Sunset, and Glimmer take places by the door, two on each side.

“Go,” whispers Sharp, and Night Hunter quickly flicks the handle before kicking the unlocked door open and charging inside.

A few steps in, he begins scanning the area as Sharp jumps in second.

The others join them immediately, feeling somewhat foolish as all five fully armed and armored Nightguards straight up fail to see anything even remotely out of place. A moment later, Sharp realizes his armor stopped its magical warning bells. Whatever the spell that triggered the strange feeling was, it faded with them entering the barracks.

“Spell’s gone,” he announces.

“Perhaps just a new alarm or something?” asks Gloom.

“I can’t say,” Sharp shakes his head, “Do a full sweep of the area,” as the others spread out, he adds, “Permanently enchanted armors like this one are rare at best. As far as I know, there’s three of us in total inside the Nightguard who have them and Luna made them personally. They’re attuned to the magic of the castle defense matrix and every new added protection has to adhere to the same pattern or the already existing spells

would nullify it. The best an armor like this can do for a non-unicorn is warn them, it doesn't give me the ability to identify magic or anything."

"No sign of 'numbers'," reports Night Hunter from the back of the barracks where his training equipment is.

"Crayons under the bed," adds Pink Sunset quickly.

"...no no no no no..." Sharp grits his teeth.

"Commander," Gloom calls out in a voice with just the tiniest bit of hysterical panic, "Get over here!"

The Nightguards gather around her bed on which lies a bulging sack stained with flour.

"I'm having flashbacks to The Godstallion," growls Night Hunter.

Sharp reaches for the sack but his hoof is slapped away by Gloom's.

With trembling hooves, the mare tries to untie the knot and fails. With a growl, she flick her fetlock and a blade slides out of her combat horseshoe. Carefully, she cuts the string and opens the sack.

"Stars above..." Sharp breathes out.

With a sudden precision strike, Gloom, baring her fangs at nothing in particular, slashes the sack open without the blade even touching the absolute mess of a changeling that's inside and freeing it in one fell swoop.

"65536?" she whispers.

The quivering, curled-up, black blob whimpers quietly while covering its head with its forelegs.

"...it's me, auntie Gloom..." she whispers again.

65536 slowly withdraws its forelegs and looks up, tears immediately pooling in its teal eyes. Gloom isn't sure how to proceed but 65536 makes a

move first by wrapping its tiny legs around her fetlock.

“Ablublbubbubluuuuuu!”

“Commander, look,” says Glimmer in a serious tone, pointing at the gaping wound in 65536 back caked with green goo and flour dust.

Without a word, Sharp begins examining 65536 while the drone is slobbering against Gloom’s leg as the mare never stops stroking its head. Its wings are bent and smashed, the terrifying back wound reveals a wound on the drone’s belly, its carapace is cracked, scratched, bruised, there’s flour dust caked on everything, mixed with green liquid which might be goo or changeling blood, and even its fetlocks seem to be bent out of shape and the flesh is clearly visible through the cracks.

Once he’s finished, he gestures at Steel Glimmer and Night Hunter, leading them away into a corner.

“I don’t need to say it, do I?” he glares at the two.

“I was due for a vacation,” Glimmer nods with a sadistic grin.

“Same,” says Night Hunter, his expression solid like a brick.

“No,” Sharp shakes his head, “Officially, you’re investigating an intrusion into the castle and an assassination attempt at a friend of the crown. Enlist anypony from the Nightguard you need.”

“Yes, Commander!” they salute.

“Get a good night’s sleep and start tomorrow. 65536 might be able to tell us something useful after some rest. I’ll sort out the details of your shifts with Darky. If you need gold, tell me.”

“Jail?” asks Night Hunter.

Sharp shakes his head which is all the Nightguards need.

There are times when law simply isn't sufficient, and those who hunt in the night know that full well. The one responsible for 65536's current state won't do it again, and anypony associated with them will hear the warning message loud and clear.

Besides, nothing the Nightguards could do to the culprit could compare to what a master of magic like Luna would do once she found out.

Sunset arrives, although nopony in the pitch blackness of the Nightguard barracks would notice.

65536 slowly opens its eyes and lets out a little squeaky yawn. It feels warm, and all the pain from last night seems distant, like a bad dream. Warm is good, warm reminds it of the drone piles of the bad old days back in the hive. The good part of the bad days when drones cleared out a cavern early, the cavern wasn't full of acidic munchers, and they could all just huddle together for an hour or two in a tight corner until further orders. Unlike then, though, the surface surrounding it is all soft and fuzzy.

After some resistance, it manages to peek its head from between Gloom's forelegs and some more wiggling frees it from the blanket. Of course, the movement immediately wakes the lightly sleeping Nightguard as well.

"How are you feeling, buddy?" she whispers, unwilling to let the drone go completely.

65536 stretches its legs as much as it can in the tight space, wincing and twitching as it feels cracking, grinding, and pulling in all the wrong places. On the other hand, the mental fog of complete exhaustion is dissipating quickly and the lack of squelching means, uhh, probably good things.

All in all, it could be worse. It *was* worse just hours ago.

"...not leaking anymore... I think..." it mumbles.

“Do you think we could talk about what happened?” she asks, “It’s okay if you don’t want to but it would help the Commander figure some things out.”

Whimper.

“Alright, alright,” Gloom scratches the drone behind the ear, “I’m not going to push you.”

“No, bad 65536!” the drone pouts suddenly and tries to wiggle out of Gloom’s embrace again, “...ow ow ow ow...”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it-”

“No!” it huffs, “I can’t be an honorific Nightguard if I’m all scaredy. We gotta warn other drones about spindly stranglers back home too!” it finally manages to free itself from Gloom’s confused grasp and sits up on the bed, its chest puffed out in defiance to its own fear.

It still keeps the blanket wrapped around its back just in case.

“Eeep?!” its eyes bulge when, with a flap of wings, Night Hunter and Steel Glimmer land by the bedside from somewhere above just as 65536 notices that Sharp and Pink Sunset are sitting on the two beds neighboring Gloom’s.

“Spindly stranglers...” Sharp asks, “Did I guess wrong? Did more dreamscape monsters get into the castle?”

“Nu-uh,” 65536 shakes its head, “It was a horny pony.”

“What the-” Night Hunter’s looks of complete disgust turns into a sigh of relative relief when Sharp explains by saying:

“It means a unicorn.”

“Yeah, a unicycle!” 65536 forces a smile.

“Come on...” Gloom gently bops its head.

“It’s less scary that way,” objects 65536.

“We can take it, honorary Nightguard. Please, give the Commander a full report,” Gloom can’t help thawing as 65536’s mood is visibly improving now that it’s surrounded by friends.

“Umm.. umm... uh...” 65536’s jaw drops, “I just realized I can’t tell you *everything*, I promised. But I can say all the important parts, I swear.”

“What do you mean?” asks Pink Sunset, his face mirroring the confusion of everypony. Everypony other than Sharp, that is, who furrows his brows and simply states:

“Understood. It’s like that thing with the mirror, right?” he waits for 65536 to nod, “So what happened?”

“I was doing my drawing when a shiny floaty came through the door. I hid under a bed but the floaty found me. We played catch a bit and then... uh... I’m not allowed to say but I ended up feeding the changelings down in the dungeons. They were in a really bad shape but it was my duty as a hilarious Nightguard to help them get through the day or maybe even more. I had love to spare because all you guys are super nice!” it beams at the surrounding faces trying to piece together what they can, “I was told to wait in a different cell until... until a thing I can’t talk about happened. Then the thing happened but it was interrupted and I was left in the cell alone. As I was waiting, a unicorn stallion came in-”

“What was he wearing?” Sharp interrupts it. 65536 describes what it can, which Sharp concludes with, “Hmph, standard castle staff attire.”

“He said he was supposed to pick me up but when I crawled out from under the bed he...” 65536 lowers its head, “He stabbed me. I didn’t know what was going on so I tried to get out but he locked the door and then it got worse and I had to *dig* his leg when he pushed me into the corner and he stabbed his floaty knife with teeth in my back and I dug through the door and escaped but there were more guards coming and I had to run and I heard them talk to the bad pony and-”

“Slow down, 65536,” Sharp puts his hoof on the drone’s nose for a moment. Its eyes are wide, it’s shaking again, and it seems to be staring blankly into nowhere, “Take a deep breath. I know it must have been terrifying but we need to know.”

65536 takes a short break before continuing:

“I ran off, faked crawling up a small air vent but in reality I went into a different, bigger one hidden behind a slidy panel. I went up but I bumped into something heavy that fell on me and I crashed all the way down. When I dug up through the mess, I couldn’t fly anymore so I had to climb up. I found the first unlocked hole and got out but I was so tired I couldn’t even see. Someone grabbed me and stuck me into that sack,” it nods to the discarded flour sack on the floor, “I think I was floating but I’m not sure. It wasn’t bumpy like riding on someone’s back, I think, but everything feels so... distant now. I think that pony brought me here and told me to stay quiet so I did. The next thing I remember was hearing a really loud noise. hoofsteps, and then Gloom pulling me out.”

“Did the voice belong to a mare or to a stallion?”

“Stallion, for sure.”

“Thank you,” Sharp forces a smile while saluting to 65536, “Excellent job, honorary Nightguard.”

“For realies?” 65536 blinks at the surprise praise, “I just got pummeled.”

“You survived an assassination attempt by an unknown enemy far surpassing your combat abilities. You proved that you can keep your cool in a difficult situation while heavily wounded. And, most of all, you revealed a hole in castle security which could be used to attack on of the princesses-”

“Oh no! Not Luna or Princess Sunbutt!” gasps 65536 in horror.

The genuine concern in the drone’s voice makes several things click in Sharp’s head.

Heh, I should have guessed where Luna's mirror could lead to.

"Exactly. That's why I said 'excellent job'," Sharp nods, "Hunter and Glims will be investigating it from now on. As for your reward, I have an idea but I'll have to run it by Luna when she comes back. Right now, I think it's time for a different kind of adventure."

...wibble...

"Can't we stay here?" asks 65536 in a once again shaking voice.

"I promise you'll like it, and Pink, Gloom, as well as myself will be coming with," Sharp smiles.

Wibble.

"What are you afraid of out there if you're with us that's worse than what can happen if you stay here *alone*?"

"Scary dream monsters..." mumbles 65536, "I'm too weak to help you if anything happens."

"Easy. Today is the Summer Sun Celebration so almost nopony will be sleeping. No dreamscape monsters will be able to get into the real world, and there will be paladins out in the open looking for any signs of supernatural trouble."

Wibble!

"Stop that!" Sharp faces the drone using the full power of its military grade puppy eyes on him, "Ponies will be everywhere, you'll have your Nightguard armor, you'll ride on Gloom's back, and we'll be able to protect you if *anything* happens. We'll buy you something nice *just stop wibbling at me!*"

WIBBLE!

Sharp takes a deep breath, refusing to lose the staring contest.

“My mind is an impenetrable fortress of peace and calm. I’ve been wibbled at by the wibbliest wibblers of all time. You should have seen Luna a year ago when I told her she had to go outside and socialize. I am completely unwibblable and, as your Commander, I order you to stop or we *won’t buy you a Luna plushie.*”

...elbbiW

“Much better,” Sharp scratches the defeated drone under the chin-

Blep!

-and automatically its tongue flops out.

“Now let’s commence operation ‘Keep the peace and cheer 65536 up’!”

“Yes, Commander!” everypony salutes.

Author's Notes:

Judge, I was pressured to release this one early, I swear!

So, here's the answer to what happened to 65536. I enjoy talking in the comments but I'm not going to be spoiling stuff that's bound to be revealed in a chapter or two, hence my mudcrabs comment.

To sum it up, Nightguards are on the hunt, smart cookie Sharp suspects that politics are being played, and NOTHING HAPPENED AGAIN. I find my lack of action disturbing.

Anyway, I hope you're still enjoying something this insanely drawn out story that, as usual, turned into something completely different than it was supposed to be. I've been having one of my "moods" for the past few days again, so let's hope the desperation from everything lets up again and the next chapter will be a bit more complex than one dialogue and a SWAT team building entry method.

156, 387: 9

The mood inside the protective dome hiding the changelings stuck in the dreamscape is as relaxed as it can be under the circumstances of them being lost in a semi-reality they don't understand. However, each group's successful escape from the Tantabus without any casualties has one particular side effect - while 156 and all the other higher ranked changelings are resting, for the past 10 minutes, not a single one of the present drones let its eyes leave 387.

Finally, the warrior tired of the invisible pressure on him sighs and looks at the cluster of drones.

"Fiiiine, I *did* promise you a reward. What kind of shiny do you want?"

"What?"

"We can pick?"

"Wooooow!"

"Whoah?!"

"Wut?"

"Wat?"

"In here, I can summon anything for you," 387 rolls his eyes, "So just pick something and have fun with it until we have to leave."

"DRONE HUDDLE!" orders 10013, being the top rank drone currently present. The remaining four shuffle closer and put their heads to its.

Whisper whisper whisper.

Whisper WHISPER whisper.

WHISPEEEEEER!

"Shiny floaties!" yells 19441 suddenly.

“Shut up! NO! GLOW GOOP, WE WANT GLOW GOOP!” 10013 tackles the traitor.

“WE CAN MAKE GLOW GOOP, DUMMY! WE WANT LAAAAMP!” 13887 jumps on 10013’s back and clamps its forelegs on its muzzle to prevent it from talking.

“Fire! ALL OF THE FIRE!” 31214 doesn’t join the fray and remains yelling from safety.

The mostly harmless tugging and grabbing ends instantly with a quiet:

“A-hem!”

The small pile of drones look at 156 from whom the clearing of the throat just came. In short, an infiltrator spoke up, drones should shut up.

“It occurs to me that something temporary and, in the end, unhelpful might not be a reward befitting a deed of such magnitude.”

“Big words!” 47989, sitting between her and 387, exclaims while beaming at everyone.

156 frowns.

“What I mean is that while you can pick anything you want without me being displeased, anything 387 makes for you will only exist here. Wouldn’t you like something more *permanent*?” she copies 47989 and *beams* at 387 who stops violently shaking his head the second the drones realize what she just said, “Like knowledg- like a story? Perhaps about himself, or the old times like when he talked about queen Shroud, or about this place. Something you will remember when we get out of here.”

“YAAAAAAAY!” the drones un-pile and start cheering, “Story-”

“I can make literally anything in here,” 387 tries to divert the new freight train of thought.

“-Story! Story! Story! Story-”

“ANY shiny, something you’d never even see in the real world.”

“-Story! Story! Story! Story-”

“A drone queen made of shinies.”

“-Stooooo- saythatagain?”

“Not. Real,” whisper 156, although loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Story! Story! Story! Story!”

387 shoots 156 a dirty glare but has to admit defeat when she only smirks.

“Fine, I’ll think of something while we figure out a way to proceed.”

“Yaaaay!”

With a round of cheers and some stomping of hooves, 387 finds himself being hugged from all sides by the five drones.

“Geez, you’ll make me glitterbug if you keep doing that.”

156 ponders that for the first time since she’s gotten to know the warrior he’s genuinely smiling.

“I think I got it!” 156 clops her hooves together, “Warriors, 918, link up! I’ll show you a method that should protect you from forgetting where you are once we split up and believing the fabricated reality that the Tantabus thing makes for you.”

“Good job,” 387 nods, impressed, “This should help us with a proper counterattack.”

“Don’t celebrate yet,” she frowns, “I can’t make it simple enough for the drones no matter what I do. They just lack the brainpower.”

“Brainpoweeeeer!”

“Let the brainwaves gooo!”

“Daaaa dee da da doo doooo!”

“Yeeeah, I know exactly what you mean,” 387 nods as the drones start humming a weird, energetic tune, “How long is it going to take?”

“Can’t say. The difference in mental skills between me and the rest is massive.”

“Got it. Will they be conscious while you’re doing it?”

“They will.”

“Good, I might have a plan. It’s not a good plan but it’s better than sitting here, waiting to be discovered because, let’s not delude ourselves, Tantabus is looking for us as we speak.”

“Oh no!” 47989 gasps, “What do we do?”

“I was getting to that, dummy,” 387 bonks the drone’s head, “First, we’ll split into three groups - drones, myself, and the rest.”

“Objection!” 156 crosses her forelegs on her chest, “I’m against leaving you alone. I’m teaching mind tricks to the others just so that I don’t have to be with them.”

“They’ll need all the help they can get,” 387 shakes his head and smiles, “Besides, I’ll be sitting here, bored, scanning the dreamscape, and making sure I can pull you out like I did before.”

156 nods.

A lie. He’s lying. Why?

“Understood,” she replies.

“As for the drones,” 387 continues, “Even if we can’t make you recognize the reality where you’ll end up as manufactured, I think it might not be that

much of a problem.”

“How come?” asks 10013.

“Think about it. So far, you caused much more damage to Tantabus than the rest of us, and that was only by you doing your normal thing. In light of that, I have only two orders for you,” 387 smirks, “One - watch each other’s backs and *stay alive*. Two - have fun.”

“You mean that?” 10013 raises an eyebrow.

“From the bottom of my heart,” 387 nods, “Do anything you want to enjoy yourselves. Dig for shinies, break stuff, don’t care about anyone other than your group because they won’t be real. So far, Tantabus wasn’t able to simulate hive links so we’ll be able to recognize ourselves.”

“Aaaand we won’t get into trouble?” asks 19441, exploring this strange, new possibility of zero punishment for having fun.

“Oh, the Tantabus will doubtlessly *try* to harm you, hence my PRIMARY objective of you keeping each other alive. You won’t get into any trouble from *us*.”

“Gotcha!” 10013 salutes, “Having fun good, mean star creature bad.”

“I couldn’t have put it better,” 387 nods.

“Are you sure that will be enough?” asks 156.

“All I’m saying is for them to focus on what they already do... mostly. Tantabus can’t turn someone into something they aren’t... unless they break down completely, which is what it will be trying to do to all of us. I firmly believe that the drones might forget where they are but not who they are.”

“Yeah, we dig stuff!”

“And carry!”

“And we like shinies!”

“Right, shinies,” 387 concentrates and each drone suddenly finds itself holding a huge golden nugget covered in gems of all colors reflecting the green shimmer of the protective dome above, “There you go, reward-”

The drones drop their presents, albeit some after quick five stages of dealing with loss.

“You said we’d get a story that we get to keep when we go home!” 10013 complains quietly, followed by ‘yeah!’ from the others. Despite previous assurances, complaining gets drones recycled or munched outright so everything going on is filled with hesitation.

“Those are some *big* shinies...” 387 nods towards the nuggets lying on the grass.

EL WIBBLO GIGANTE EN MASSE!

“Nnnnggggh! Stupid... natural... empathy...” 387 clutches his chest when faced with the begging eyes of all drones at the same time. Several seconds of heavy breathing later, he chokes out, “Yes, I’ll tell you a story, now stop that! You have to decide on a topic, though, okay?”

Drones huddle up again, whispering and growling at each other.

“Phew,” 387 wipes his forehead before giving 156 a smug glance, “Now watch them argue until we have to leave. And don’t you dare push them or I’ll just make stuff up. Good game, I win, *infiltrator*.”

156 only smiles. A second later, 918, the second infiltrator present, asks:

“How about each of you guys gets a question or two instead, since we might not have the time for a full story?”

387 *glares* at 156 who only winks at him.

“Next time, make it a challenge.”

With 156 working in the depths of the other changelings' minds, the drones are sitting in a half-circle around 387, eyes locked on him while the warrior mentally prepares for the questions, *no matter how 'drone' they're bound to be.*

"Okay, one by one. Go by ascending rank so that we don't argue," 387 says.

"Who was the most awesome changeling ever?" asks 10013, "Like totally powerful!"

"I mean, pick any queen, really," 387 shrugs, "If I were to choose from those, then-"

"No no no, I mean not a queen," 10013 corrects itself.

"Oh, like a normal changeling? That would be, obviously, a contest between ranks 1 of every hive period."

"Ooooh, I know!" 10013's eyes light up, "Who was the first rank 1 you remember? Were they awesome? Infiltrator, warrior, drone?"

Of course, no one but 156 notices the slight misting of 387's eyes and a moment of looking into nowhere before the warrior answers:

"Yep, he was. I can't answer the second part, though. Long time ago, changelings weren't so strictly split into their roles, w- they were just changelings. He wasn't the most powerful rank 1 either, but you *did* ask for the oldest I can remember or that I heard of."

"I bet he didn't have holes at all other than cup holders."

"He didn't have cup holders at all."

GASP!

"But that's the best part!" 31241 clamps its forelegs over its mouth, "Sorry, not my turn."

387 can't help snickering.

“Old changelings didn’t have holes. Well, other than nose, ears, and all the classic jazz. The holes in our legs represent a generational lack of love. We’re not insects despite what we look like, we have a skeleton inside us just like ponies, so our armor, our *exoskeleton*, makes us very heavy unless adjusted with love. Old changelings had the love to maintain full armor but over time we had less and less so the changelings had to compensate. Plates instead of full armor, holes to lower the weight, same with the density. On the other hole, necessity is the mother of invention. The thinner chitin is more useful for leg blades, holes gave way to climbing hooks, strategic holes in wings allow for much better maneuverability in comparison to pegasi and griffons. That’s why it’s difficult to compare changelings throughout time because while the old ones may have had more love at their disposal, today’s changelings are able to do so much more with less that... that...” he smiles, “Maybe even drones like you could go one-on-one with the weakest of warriors from the bad eras.”

“Woowooooow!” 10013’s eyes go wide.

“Now, if you want to know about the most *powerful* rank 1, I think that our ‘beloved’ queen’s top infiltrator might be right up there. Well, it *would* be a toss up between her and Haze’s rank 1.”

“Who’s Haze, another queen?”

“How did you guess that?”

“Because they have a name!”

“Smart drone. Anyway, is that enough of an answer for you?”

“Well...” 10013, “Who’s the rank 1 you like the most and what kind of a changeling were they? I mean, a nice one? Would they kick a drone if they passed us, or play drone ball?”

387 chuckles.

“That would be the oldest rank 1 I know about, definitely. He was a kind soul... I heard, but he was frail. Not much of a fighter or a mind-control

specialist but an excellent tactician and commander. In fact, he *would* play drone ball with you-

“...doesn’t sound all that nice...”

“-by which I mean that he would use a real ball and you’d get to play with it or even keep it to play with other drones.”

10013’s jaw drops, its expression a mix of admiration and disbelief.

“Yep, he was a good changeling... by all records and historical accounts.”

10013 only nods and nudges 13887.

“Ooh? My turn? Okay!” the other drone fidgets, “Where do drones come from?”

That gives 387 a pause.

“Uhh, eggs?”

“Yeah, even I know that,” pouts 31214.

“No, I mean...” 13887 shakes its head, “I mean, you talked about that rank 1 guy, right? And you said changelings were changelings, not drones, warriors, and so on.”

“Ahh, I think I understand,” 387 nods, “Well, it might surprise you but you drones, as a class, were made only when old changelings moved from the surface underground. Old changelings didn’t need to dig underground or have dedicated manual laborers, that all came with the first changeling hives. Remember my story about Queen Shroud? She was the one who relegated certain changelings into roles we would understand as drones. But the strict breeding of required changeling classes came later when it was necessary to have specialized infiltrators, warriors, and other more obscure sub-classes. Does that answer your question?”

“Mhm.”

“That was quick. Next, 19441!”

“Yay! So, my question is - was there a queen that liked us drones or were they all mean to us? Or maybe if there was a queen that was more like a drone? I think I heard a warrior say one time that Queen Chrysalis is an infiltrator. I can’t recall when, too many blows in the head. Sorry, heheh.”

“A drone-like queen? No, definitely not,” 387 shakes his head, “But a queen who treated drones fairly? Several, actually. You must understand one thing, guys, and it’s important. The way you’re treated, your disposability, is only because of the hive’s lack of love, and the hive has been low for... a very long time. Yes, some changelings are assholes but *most* don’t treat you badly because they don’t like you, they just... don’t think of you as... as changelings,” 387 sighs when he sees the drones’ mouths start quivering as one, “I wish I could tell you something else but I doubt you’d want me to just lie and make stuff up. If our love situation stabilizes or improves, and if our queens... don’t keep making the same mistakes again and again, then one day things might get better for you. And by you I mean drones, not you exactly. With standard drone life span, I doubt any of you are going to see that. I’m sorry.”

To his surprise, the drones just huddle closer together.

They know. They all know.

“So... you’re saying that there *was* a queen who liked us?” 19441 asks.

“Mhm,” 387 nods, “Queen Venom comes to mind. She even made drones go to pony schools to mix and learn. As I said, though, she wasn’t the only one. In general, the earlier queens cared for all changelings, not just for the powerful few top ranks.”

“Wooo, someone liked us!” 19441 cheers.

“Yeah!”

“We didn’t always get munched!”

“We might get a queen one day too!”

“YAAAAAAAY!”

387 can't help smiling. Their cheers are forced, no way around it, but it's clear they didn't expect even the little bit of good news, or *olds*, they got.

"Next question, guys," he says.

"Can I be a drone queen?" asks 31214.

"I'm fairly sure that our hive loyalists here are just itching to see you try to overthrow our current queen," 387 raises an eyebrow.

"Oooh, scary!" to his surprise, 31214 shakes its head, clarifying, "No no no, I meant that if I got the high score! If I ate ALL THE LOVE! Would that make me a queen or would I just have *the best cup holders ever*?"

"Heh," 387 smirks, "I can *show* you what would happen if you got enough love. In short, you'd look more like old changelings. That's because old changelings used to love each other and that kind of love strengthened them without the predator-prey zero sum game. That's a concept which has been lost to us over time due to power struggles and, admittedly, some following biological changes as well. To my knowledge, though, if there were enough changelings in the right frame of mind the process might occur again."

"Oh? Show me show me show me show me!"

"Alright. You'll just look like it, though, you won't feel any different," 387 closes his eyes.

31214 suddenly starts rising into the air and, with a flash, its carapace turns mossy green, its leg holes close, and some sort of fluff sprouts around its neck. It spreads its now bigger wings reflecting the light cast by the dome into a strange green-based rainbow. The drone squees ecstatically.

"I AM THE SHINY, BOW BEFORE ME!"

"Aaand that's enough," 387 shakes his head and the group vision ends, leaving behind a beaming drone visibly satisfied from its hooves to its stubby horn, "Dummy, your turn."

47989 scratches its head before asking the one question 387 has been dreading more than any other.

“Where did changelings come from?”

Everyone is staring at 387 now.

“From necessity and a huge mistake,” he breathes out quietly.

“Umm, I don’t understand,” 47989 pokes the ground with its hoof.

“Yup, because I forgot I said the reward would be for the drones who successfully fought off Tantabus on their own. You were here with me so you’re going to have to earn your question too.”

“Awww...” 47989 pouts but doesn’t push it.

“So, I fulfilled my promise. 156, how are you with that mind trick?”

“All done. 918 and the warriors should be fine.”

“Then I think we should get going. The longer we stay without making a mess elsewhere, the greater the chance that Tantabus will find us here.”

“Where are we going then?”

“Away. It doesn’t exactly matter. I’m certain Tantabus will find you the second you enter the portal,” 387’s eyes flash green and two floating, pony-sized ovals appear in the air, one near the warrior group and one behind the drones, “Where you land will depend entirely on its will.”

“Got it - be ready for anything,” 156 nods and vanishes. Invisible, she says, “Drones, get going. My group, follow me.”

“918, *don’t fuck up*,” is all the low-ranked infiltrator hears before 156’s hive link disappears completely. With a deep breath, 918 enters the portal.

10013 stands up and says out loud:

“You heard the high-ranks, guys! Let’s watch our backs and *have fun!*”

“WOOOOOOOOO!” as one, the drones charge towards their portal before their fears can catch up to them.

Left alone, 387 sighs and quietly laughs to himself.

“Made it just in time, eh? Good luck, guys, I’ll buy you as much time and draw as much attention as I can.”

The green dome fades, revealing a towering star form of Tantabus standing right behind it, its enormous hoof about to stomp down. It grins as 387’s protection disappears and shrinks down into pony- well, alicorn size.

The new form has to be Princess Celestia, although one wearing gold-foiled plate armor and with fiery burning mane instead of the peaceful rainbow one. At least that’s what 156, invisible, not breathing, and suppressing her hive link as hard as she can is thinking as she watches from the edge of the clearing.

387, however, knows who Daybreaker is and what she represents.

“I see, I’m a target of regret rather than fear,” 387 faces the Tantabus, “But wearing her form is low even for a monster like you...”

“The dreamweavers are useful entities in seeking out weaknesses of you pathetic worms. They figured out your weakness back in the forest and I know how to use them just the same. You have seen too much to fear *anything* but in the same way you’ve been helpless to do anything throughout the ages.”

“I know, I know,” 387 hangs his head.

With a laugh like a saw biting into metal, Tantabus looks around and 156 can’t shake off the feeling that it knows about her, that its eyes lingered on her just for a microsecond too long, and that its grin only grew a fraction wider.

In front of 387, a new swirling portal opens and the warrior walks into it without any resistance, followed by the Tantabus.

With them gone, the portal begins to shimmer and wobble, prompting 156 to charge ahead and jump into it. 387 is bound to fail under pressure because whatever he may be, he's a good creature accepting of his mistakes. 156, however, is an infiltrator whose purpose for existing is to break into the minds of others and twist them to her will.

Empaths have many strengths but one huge weakness.

Psychopaths have many weaknesses but one huge strength.

Author's Notes:

There we go. I tried to answer all the questions I understood and which made sense. Some will be answered in other parts of the story, and some straight up can't be.

Anyway, the fight against the Tantabus begins.

CH: 8/13 - Bloodlust

Another day, another seemingly endless stretch of grassland ahead of Chrysalis. This time, however, she's not getting carted around, having opted to stretch her legs before another inevitable dive into the depths of her mind. Still, the air is fresh, the sun isn't *overly* obtrusive, and she isn't sensing any amount of discontent from her two warriors.

"Do you like it out here, you two?" she asks.

"Your... Majesty?" 68 recovers first from the surprise of their queen doing anything other than giving them orders.

"Is there something wrong with your ears?"

"N-No, Your Majesty!" 68 stutters.

"96, I am *absolutely* certain I added 'you two' to my question."

"Y-You did, Your Majesty," 96 is somehow lost in a situation where a higher-ranked changeling is present and the queen's attention is on him, "I, umm, I feel like it's a change of pace but... I prefer being underground, Your Majesty."

"And you, 68?"

"I-I'm having mixed feelings, Your Majesty," 68 gathers her scattered thoughts, "It's too hot out here but I like the breeze. I like being able to see far and wide but, in the same way, being this easy to spot doesn't feel right. I think I agree with 96 - I'd love to be able to occasionally be out here without having to worry about being attacked but most of the time I'd like to remain underground."

"In that case, hypothetically, if you were able to walk on the surface without the fear of pony retribution, you would use the opportunity, right?"

“Occasionally, yes,” 68 replies and 96 nods in agreement.

“Would it, say, make you happier?”

“Nothing can make me happier than serving the hiv-”

“Yes yes,” Chrysalis rolls her eyes, “Be happy and obedient or get recycled, I know the ‘Unspoken rules of hive survival’, you idiots. If we had a culture of literature and that section of the hive mind was a book, it would be a bestseller. Now, I won’t punish you for lying to me just now if you answer me honestly. Although that reply might already be more telling than anything you could say.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, it would make me happier,” admits 68. When Chrysalis keeps looking at her, she adds, “I... I’m a hive guard, a good one on top, but with that designation I’ve rarely left the hive and I’ve never been among ponies. Hunting in Manehattan would have been difficult for me without the access to the infiltrator experience through you. What I saw in Canterlot showed me how much there is to see beyond tunnels and utilities made of our resin. It was... interesting.”

“I see,” Chrysalis falls quiet.

“May I-” 96 pauses, gathering courage, “May I ask why the sudden interest, Your Majesty?”

68 almost chokes on her spit as she hears the question and she immediately starts pondering how difficult it’s going to be to pull their cart alone.

“Oh?” Chrysalis raises an eyebrow, “Is there anything wrong with the queen taking an interest in the opinions of her subjects?”

YEEEESSSSSSSS! Only a few weeks ago, a question like that would be considered second-guessing the queen and would be grounds for recycling!

Neither of the two warriors can vocalize the thought, however.

Chrysalis, however, knows it full well and doesn’t wait for their reply.

“You two, I’ve been digging through the hive mind and our history for some time now. I’ve seen our successes and failures repeated over and over. We were used, abused, and thrown away afterwards. And I think that what I’m about to learn isn’t going to get better. This made me ask myself - what do we want? What is our goal? Taking over Canterlot? I failed twice and neither time it was what *we* wanted. It was what *they*, the insane queens, wanted,” she takes a deep breath, “But there were queens who wanted exactly what *you* two just said - the simple ability to walk on the surface, unafraid. Do you know what stopped them every time, who was the enemy that ended their rule?” when they shake their heads, she continues, “*Every. Single. Time.* It was another changeling, be it directly or indirectly. The way I see it, there are only two paths we can take to end the cycle. Care to guess which?”

The warriors think as she climbs onto the cart again before she adds:

“Well?”

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” 96 admits, “This isn’t my forte.”

“I wanted to say that we would have to conquer the world but,” 68 shakes her head, “That wouldn’t make sense since, as you said, we were supposed to be our own worst enemy.”

“I’ll let you two think about it,” Chrysalis makes herself as comfortable on the cart as she can, “Be sure to have an answer by the time I deal with whatever queen is waiting for me next.”

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath of fresh air, and dives into the hive mind again.

Huh, another floating one.

She finds herself hovering over a coastline besieged by ships from which ponies are pouring out.

Correction - changelings disguised as ponies.

A few moments later, the 'pegasi' fly out from the ships and begin peppering anything moving with crossbow bolts.

The defending force is pitifully small - fewer than fifty zebras wearing leather armors and barely protected with small wooden shields rush towards the first landing point.

Their support comes as more zebras, clearly civilians, answer with firebombs from the streets but there's no real military infrastructure to stop the invaders as the pony ships dock. Whatever the reason for the changeling invasion was, the zebra defenders had no idea it was coming.

The lack of, even late, military response gets explained soon, as an explosion rocks the fortress in the city center towards which a mob of zebras is retreating through the streets.

Panic breaks out as, one by one, the civilians realize that their only safe place was, in fact, the first one to fall.

Chrysalis watches rank changelings sweep the streets and gather the non resisting zebras.

"Execute them!"

The order rings through the hive mind. Common changelings exchange surprised glances before the will of their commanders is forced onto them and they begin massacring the population. Screams of horror follow, as changelings begin barricading houses from the outside and throwing explosives in through the windows.

Less than twenty minutes later, the entire coastal city is on fire.

This must be the north coast of Zebrica then. Is this a political move to weaken Equestria's position in the world? During the last memory, changelings were hidden in the White Tail Woods. Did this cause the retreat?

The memory shifts.

This time, Chrysalis is looking through the eyes of a changeling disguised as a zebra wearing gold chains and ornaments of all sorts sitting behind a long table inside what must be some kind of a throne room.

“This must not remain unanswered!” he slams his hoof against the table, “This is the fourth city they burned to the ground!”

“We’ve already sent a diplomatic envoy to Equestria and we’re sending reinforcements from the heartland. If the war council agrees to temporary union, the might of the entire continent will bear down on the attackers like time and time before,” replies the zebra sitting at the head of the table.

The weird thing is that if we were controlling the south, why would any zebra believe that it was ponies attacking them and not disguised changelings? Wish I knew a bit more about our current position in Equestria.

“More and more zebras are being killed while we talk,” objects the changeling, “We can’t be waiting for the diplomatic response. Several years ago, it was the changelings attacking us and the ponies eradicated them with our help. Without any threat to Equestria on their continent, her power-hungry eyes are turning towards us! We *MUST* answer before she decides to lead an attack herself, not send envoys and *beg* her to leave us be!”

“YEAH!” comes a chorus of cheers from the majority of zebras present.

Yep, just politics. Instigating two sides against one another while changelings profit. Now... how do we actually profit from this?

The memory shifts again, this time overlooking the now familiar south coastline of Equestria and a *massive* zebra fleet approaching.

What interests Chrysalis more, though, are the changelings disguised as ponies escaping the cities underneath her, their minds lit up for her to sense. Strangely enough, because she shouldn’t be able to sense the minds of memory entities other than the queens.

She wants me to see this.

Time speeds up. Changelings escape west from all over the south in groups, pairs, or alone, all with the simple order to leave as zebras roll over the south.

In her mind, she follows the changelings west into White Tail and into previously prepared tunnels leading into a large yet shallow network of tunnels where they simply sit down and start hibernating.

Shortly after Chrysalis begins exploring the tunnels, the wall behind her explodes.

“Heh,” chuckles a voice right before something grabs her hind leg and flings her deeper into the tunnel.

Even while skipping over the stone floor like a rock over a lake, Chrysalis retains enough self-control to strengthen her carapace and avoid taking any real damage past scratches and small bruises.

From the corner of her eyes, she notices a large, bulky shadow rapidly approaching her.

Another warrior queen.

All she has to do is withdraw all her love into herself just like before and allow the queen to punch her as she’s getting up. It hurts, but unlike her original fight with Mandible, none of her bits have been punched off.

Yep, works like a charm. Warriors just can’t control my love well enough to fuel their power.

To her surprise, the queen backs off, giving Chrysalis a moment to appreciate her brutish form. Still, despite her black scheme tinted with red and her blood-red eyes, she looks pretty much like any other warrior queen before... only with more spikes all over. Fairly tacky, in fact.

“Hmph, afraid of a real contest of skill?” she asks.

“Stupid waste of love is one of the reasons why we never really made it,” replies Chrysalis with contempt, “I’m sure I’m going to need all of mine for something more useful than a show. Besides,” her horn flashes, “I don’t think you can move anymore. Go on, try it!”

The warrior queen strains against her invisible bonds for a moment, her carapace creaking and the muscles underneath bulging, but eventually has to admit her loss.

“Oh well. Can’t expect a warrior to win a mental battle inside someone else’s head,” she says in a surprisingly casual tone, “I am queen Bloodlust and, if you want a quick summary of my lifetime, without me there would be no changeling hive anymore.”

“Elaborate.”

“You’ll understand once you meet my mother,” Bloodlust laughs, “Seriously, the first warrior queen was almost our last one. Didn’t make a good case for us at all. Anyway, what do you want other than to purge me from your head?”

“Just the usual,” Chrysalis waves her hoof casually without stopping watching the warrior for a second. She can’t help feeling that unlike the previous warriors this one’s not exactly acting in good faith, “Scream’s involvement in our history, the burning rage inside the hive mind which has been retreating from me for a while now. You can start with either, really.”

“Ah, the definitely not suspicious alicorn,” Bloodlust nods with a smirk, “I’m fairly certain she was the one who persuaded my mother to invade the Griffon Empire... and Zebrica... and the Dragon Lands... hole, even the undead territory. Seriously, how stupid must a queen be to be persuaded to drain love and lust from *the undead*. Sometimes, I completely understand why we warriors have the reputation that we have,” she sighs, shakes her head, and suddenly bursts forward. She makes it barely a hoof’s width forward before freezing again.

Chrysalis only raises an eyebrow.

“I think I felt something. Did I feel something? Maybe a warrior trying to break an infiltrator’s control? Or did I just eat some bad love yesterday?”

“Har har,” Bloodlust frowns, “Aaanyway,” she continues as if nothing happened, “She sent infiltrators to elicit dragon love too *by turning themselves into lumps of gold*. Seriously, how totally braindead-”

“I’m about to meet her so don’t spoil the surprise. Besides, I don’t care about your family issues, I care about Scream,” Chrysalis interrupts her tirade.

“Alright, alright. So, I was suspicious of her ever since she supported my mother’s idiotic warmongering decisions that almost buried us all so I instructed my infiltrators to closely follow events in Equestria as much as it was possible with everyone knowing about us and trying to eradicate anything even remotely related to our species. You see, after my mother invaded *everyone* and failed-”

Sounds waaaaay too familiar, mom.

“-I killed her and took over. Handing her corpse as well as those of her top ranks to the Dragon Lord and to the griffons to display them as their trophies placated the two most bloodthirsty enemies while forcing everyone to hide and scattering changelings into small cells all over Equestria made hunting us down near impossible. Anyway, as I said, once things cooled down a little, I had changelings infiltrate pony cities all over the place. They hunted, they spread, they controlled, they survived.”

“Until you blew it by attacking the zebras.”

“Blew it? Of course not. I made a deal with Scream just like my mother, only I wasn’t stupid enough to get baited into nonsense. Scream needed a distraction from events in the north and promised me her plan would allow us to gain territory without being contested, which was impossible after my mother’s failures. All we had to do was spur on the war between zebras and ponies, and then lay low for some time. The war should clean up the south

while split pony forces would be powerless to fight her plans in the north. Gotta give it to her, she was right.”

No, she used you like she did with everyone else, you’re only too stupid to see it. You were recovering, you were slowly securing your position, and you threw it all away just because you wanted open territory.

Open territory where changelings could walk in sunlight.

Holes damn it!

“What happened in the north?” asks Chrysalis instead of berating the other queen.

“Some kind of a unicorn warlord appeared out of nowhere and started building up in the north years ago. My infiltrators reached some changelings there who fled the hive after it was clear that my mother wasn’t stopping with her war effort and *reminded* them of their loyalties.”

“Please don’t tell me you were stupid enough to execute them for betraying the hive or something.”

Like I would not too long ago...

“They were allowed to stay there on the condition of giving me information. I don’t use up my resources for no reason,” Bloodlust gives Chrysalis an irritated look, “They still ended up escaping from there anyway.”

“How come?”

“That unicorn warlord, Sombra or something, started out okay as far as they knew, using magic and really weird technology to build some sort of a city state he called The Crystal Empire in which a bunch of ponies of all species could live. He had a pretty good relationship with ponies, with trade and stuff. My sources even said that Sombra and Celestia were romantically involved.”

“Sounds alright. What went wrong?” Chrysalis corrects herself, “I mean, how did Scream twist this seemingly perfect situation?”

“Can’t say with any kind of certainty. At some point, things got *weird*. All that pony friendship stuff gave way to forced labor, pony experimentation, and strange magic experiments. The only variable that changed was the arrival of a magic expert whom Sombra eventually took on as a lover instead of Celestia. I could only leave a few infiltrators there specifically trained to deal with mind control but I pulled most of those out once Sombra started his military expansion to Equestria.”

“Crystal Empire... doesn’t ring a bell,” Chrysalis furrows her brows, “I even invaded the north but there wasn’t anything there.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you there. After zebras ruined the south of Equestria and Celestia was able to strike a deal with them that they’ll control the territory as long as they’ll allow the ponies living there to remain there unharmed, she went on to fight in the north with her sister. Sombra’s army was beaten back and that’s all I know. When I sent out scouts from White Tail, the entire Empire was gone. Not eradicated, ruined, or anything, simply *gone*,” Bloodlust shrugs, “Lesson learned - don’t piss off *two* alicorns at once.”

Luna went crazy after building a new magic research laboratory under a new magic teacher. Sombra started dark magic experiments with his new lover. I think the situation is pretty clear cut here.

“IT HAS BEEN SINCE THE BEGINNING, AND YOU ALL SERVED THAT DAMN ALICORN LIKE THE LOYAL HOOF POLISHING TOOLS THAT YOU WERE!” a mental scream of pure fury sends Chrysalis on the floor as her knees buckle.

The burst of rage distorts reality around them and Chrysalis can barely roll away from Bloodlust’s hoof about to crush her skull.

“Not again...” she groans, fighting the onset of nausea and a headache while barely able to see Bloodlust about to kick her.

It's a tactic.

Chrysalis realizes what's happening just in time to jump back on all fours and start running. Pour love into legs, make herself lighter, give herself just a few seconds.

This time she doesn't waste love on trying to control Bloodlust. She needs to control *herself* first. Without access to her love reserves, Bloodlust, even infected by rage, won't be a threat.

She just needs to clear her head. One moment to breathe-

"MOTHER, HELP ME!"

"Not now!" Chrysalis grits her teeth, *feeling* the massive ball of anger and chitin slowly catching up to her.

"I GOT ONE, I'M STRONG ENOUGH! I CAN-"

The crunch and gurgle at the end of that sentence makes tears burst out of Chrysalis' eyes.

"ENOUGH, YOU COWARD!" she roars, turns around, and simply raises her foreleg against charging Bloodlust. Emerald flames of love envelop her entire body just as the warrior rams into her, "STOP HIDING IN THE SHADOWS AND FACE ME!"

The last thing that goes through Bloodlust's mind is Chrysalis' motionless hoof.

The memory shatters.

Chrysalis wakes up, breathing heavily and staring into the eyes of two paralyzed warriors.

The cart has been cleaved in half and there's a scorched scar in the ground between 68 and 96, both of whom have one side of their carapace basically gone, leaving open muscles visible in the air.

To Chrysalis' surprise, all the damage she just caused cost her a fairly small amount of love, which makes her evaluate her situation and say her orders.

"Fix the cart with resin," she steps out of the wreckage as regally as one can in such a situation, "Once you're done, you're to rest while I do the pulling. I need to stretch my legs and get my blood flowing anyway."

"Your Majesty, we can-" 68 objects.

"96, how would you like a promotion?" Chrysalis interrupts her.

"-start right away!" 68 corrects her objection.

As the two begin fixing the cart, Chrysalis sits down and looks over the rolling hills into the distance.

I'm closing in on the source and whoever she is, she knows it. She can affect other shades, she can dig through MY memories just like I'm doing to the others, and she's just a damn SHADE!

Chrysalis raises her hoof and examines it.

It's trembling.

She can't make it stop.

Author's Notes:

This one's a bit more about Chrysalis than changeling history but there's only so many ways I can write "A queen screwed up, Screem used someone to make Celestia cry, and regular changelings got shafted with the equivalent of a battering ram made by Bad Dragon."

Aaaah, I wish I had the time to write a story about Sombra, dwarves, Crystal Empire, and void creatures but there's only one head, two hands, and limited amount of energy.

1313: 6

It's near noon inside the Blueblood estate and the situation is far from normal. Well, depending on how you define normal.

The entire thing started when an earth pony arrived only half an hour earlier while Zamira was in the shower and a different guard gave a small scroll case to 1313.

Inside the long dining hall on the bottom floor, Zamira is standing under one of the chandeliers and looking up at the large unicorn form of Blueblood curled up around the metal rod on which the chandelier is hanging.

"Get down from there!" she calls out, her voice echoing through the empty room.

"NO!" yells 1313.

"How did you even get there, you don't have wings?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

"Fine, I'll go get the broom."

"HISSSSSSSS!"

"Stop freaking out like you always do!"

"SHE WANTS TO EAT ME!"

"If she knew about you replacing Blueblood she wouldn't send a message, she would teleport a unit of paladins right into this room to drag you off."

"Oh..."

“Sooo?”

“Umm, how do I get down?”

“Asking again, how did you get up?”

“IT’S A BLUR!”

“If that chandelier breaks, it’s NOT coming from my salary.”

“It’s been holding me just fine so far!”

“I’m just warning you for when I start throwing things. Hey, that vase looks interestingly priceless.”

“Okay, okay, I’ve got an idea-” 1313 starts fiddling with his fetlock.

Crack!

Plop!

“-Ouch.”

“EWWWW, DON’T THROW YOUR BITS AT ME!” Zamira dodges the tossed limb and starts pawing at her head to wipe off the goo that splattered over her.

“Sorry...”

“Just let go. I’ll catch you!”

“Oookay. Three, two, one, go-” 1313 lets go of the chandelier.

Splat!

Chunks of his carapace scatter all over the big room.

“-owww... youweresupposedtocatchme...” 1313 grunts towards Zamira whose main contribution to this situation was quickly sidestepping his

falling body.

“That’s for gooping all over my mane. You never goop into a mare’s mane,” Zamira turns around and starts walking off, “STAFF! CLEANUP IN THE DINING ROOM!” with a final look back, she adds, “Once you glue yourself back together, meet me in Blueblood’s study.”

1313 limps into the study, accompanied by a very stained grumbling servant wearing rubber gloves and a poncho who closes the door behind him.

“Grumpy guy,” comments 1313.

“Just wait until somepony notices the green mess you’re leaving on the carpet,” Zamira nods to the previously beautiful, fuzzy, red carpet all over the floor.

“Ahhh, holes...” 1313 sighs.

“Anyway, if you’re done falling to pieces, both metaphorically and literally, let’s try to guess what’s going on. So, Celestia wants to see you, *alone*, in the castle dungeons.”

“Mhm,” 1313 nods, “She even left very specific instructions on how to get there as if-”

“As if you’ve never been there before,” Zamira finishes the thought, “Now, it’s *possible* Blueblood’s never gone down there so don’t freak out again. Hay, *I*’ve never been there either.”

“Oh...” 1313 blinks in surprise, “I assumed-”

“That a spoiled brat like Blueblood would... what exactly? It’s not as if he spends much time inside the castle in the first place, especially outside of balls and celebrations.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Good. So what did we learn from this?”

“Ummm...”

“We learned to talk to the smart zebra warrior lady before jumping to conclusions.”

“Making a mental note of that right this second.”

“If you throw a hoof my way again, I’ll be sure to carve a rule or two into it in case you forget.”

“Not funny,” 1313 pouts, “Everything still hurts. You try dropping spread-eagle ten pony heights directly on your stomach. Why didn’t you just ask someone to bring a stepladder?”

“I must have forgotten in such a stressful situation,” Zamira shrugs with a smug smirk.

“Ass.”

“Aww, you wanna kiss mine to feel better?”

“Is that how the saying goes? I thought-”

“That’s the version for adults.”

“Got it.”

Zamira shakes her head, sighing.

How is it possible we were outsmarted by these guys?

“Let’s get you cleaned up. I’ll go to the castle with you.”

“I’m supposed to come alone. I doubt you’ll be able to intimidate Celestia like you did with the guards last time.”

“That’s why I’ll be waiting outside the castle proper on lookout for anypony with a body bag. If they whack you and throw you in the trash, I’ll swoop in, grab all the bits I can find, and put you back together.”

“You look *way* too excited at the prospect.”

“What can I say? I enjoy jigsaw puzzles.”

For reasons unknown to 1313, Canterlot is *brimming* with life. The annoying kind of brimming.

“Why are there so many ponies?”

“What?”

“WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PONIES?”

“WHAAAAT?”

1313 gestures at Zamira to lean over.

“Ponies. Everywhere!”

“Oh! The Summer Sun Celebration is tonight. Everypony is getting ready and adding the finishing touches.”

“What’s that?”

“The way I understand it, it’s a celebration dedicated to Princess Celestia,” Zamira shrugs, “I haven’t exactly looked into it, I just usually get hammered from all the stuff imported from everywhere around Equestria and take a few days off afterwards. Speaking of which, you’re *technically* Blueblood. Can I get the rest of the week off?”

“Can’t it wait for *after* whatever this meeting with Celestia is about?”

“I would prefer knowing it beforehoof just in case of... you know.”

1313 sighs.

“...you can have the rest of the week off...”

“See? This is why I like you!” Zamira beams, patting his head.

1313 doesn't reply because just at that moment the warning bells in his head start ringing. It takes him a moment to recognize why with all the milling around but a changeling mind is a wondrous thing in some respects and gives him the answer. A specific assortment of colors and shapes has been following them ever since they left the estate.

Hmmm...

He picks up the pace, making sure to occasionally turn his head as if observing one of the many ponies preparing their concession stand or any other business in the street just to catch a glimpse of the pony following them. As they finally reach the walls separating the castle courtyard from the city, he tells Zamira what exactly to keep an eye out for, and enters the castle proper under the watchful eyes of two Royal Guards on duty.

Unlike the city, the courtyard behind the tall walls is almost eerily quiet, prompting 1313 to keep looking around. Roughly halfway to the castle itself he spots a Royal Guard stallion standing so close to the gilded main gate that his armor is almost blending with it. He's looking straight at 1313.

Welp, no turning back now.

One wing of the gate is open and 1313 can see the faint shimmer of a magical *something* in its place.

Breathe, breathe. If he moves the second I pass through, I... what? Do I just run? If I get ousted then Blueblood will blow me up. If I admit what's going on, no one will believe me. Zamira won't risk her retirement reward, reputation, and employment to save me.

And so he steps through, ears perked for any sign of the guard's reaction. Quickened breathing, shouting, a twitch.

Nothing happens.

Maybe they haven't figured out a universal anti-changeling spell yet. Maybe their alarms only work on specific changelings. I know they work on SOME at least, unless Torchlight was completely blowing smoke. Maybe my disguise is sufficient.

The only thing he can hear as he's walking through the castle, following the path to the dungeons described in the message he got, are the occasional faint steps presumably belonging to the servants or patrolling guards. No commotion or anything, as if the castle was mostly empty.

Did everyone take a day off to prepare for this Summer Sun thing?

He almost trips as he descends the final set of stairs and sees a *paladin* standing by the only door at the end of a short hallway on the bottom. The unicorn's horn flares up immediately, a faint shimmer enveloping 1313 for a moment and vanishing shortly after as he unlocks the heavily reinforced door for the changeling.

They didn't need to send anyone after me, I came to the dungeons on my own. All they have to do is lock the door behind me now.

Click!

1313's eye twitches as the paladin on the other side does just that.

Wish number two, this stupid necklace falls off without exploding and I get teleported out of Canterlot.

Nothing.

It was worth a shot.

His heart definitely stops for a moment as he reaches the described cell, opens the unlocked door, and sees Princess Celestia sitting on the floor, immediately looking up at him.

“I’m glad you decided to come,” she says, standing up and measuring him, “As I stated in the message, I need your help with something... *critical*.”

“I’m listening, but why me and not anyo- anypony more suited for this?”

“I think you might be uniquely suited for this. Grandmaster Beacon told me how you fared during the reserve training and I agree with his assessment that you deserve a chance. If a pony like him believes there may be hope for you then there isn’t anything that would make me happier.”

1313 takes a deep breath. His infiltrator instincts keep gnawing at him, telling him that everything is deeply wrong with this conversation, but he can’t put a hoof on what exactly is triggering it.

“Alright, what’s wrong?”

Celestia frowns and starts pacing back and forth, her horn shimmering.

“Yesterday, an assassin got into the castle and attempted to kill an ‘associate’ of my sister,” golden light envelops the room, and when it fades it leaves behind two shimmering silhouettes - one unicorn wearing the standard outfit of castle servants whose face is smooth like that of a ponnequin, and one comparatively tiny silhouette that’s blurry and glitched beyond recognition, “I had a meeting with Luna’s friend here but I was called off on what I believe was a fake meeting arranged exactly to allow for the attack to happen.”

With a flash of her magic, the two silhouettes begin moving.

The unicorn beckons to the other equine the size of a small mare or a big foal hidden under the bed, they crawl out, and a quick skirmish breaks out where the little one gets pushed into the corner.

The entire scene plays out as 1313 watches first with a frown but in the end with a barely controlled scowl. Once the small equine flees through a hole they broke through the cell door, the scene resets and 1313 asks:

“How could a... a young pony survive a stab through their back and chest with a serrated dagger?”

“The identity of Luna’s associate isn’t something I can share at the moment. Focus on the crime, please,” replies Celestia.

“I am, I just don’t see how I can be of any assistance. I’m no investigator, this is a job for the guards.”

“Grandmaster Beacon told me he overheard your conversation with another paladin trainee who was, let’s say, less than charitable in their language about me while questioning castle security. Considering that the assassin got in and out without anypony being able to identify him in any accurate fashion, your ‘friend’ might have been right. What I’m asking of you is to probe in your social circles because I doubt sending anypony from the law enforcement their way would be of any use.”

“Why do you think they’ll tell *me* anything?”

Celestia looks directly into 1313’s eyes and for the first time he feels like he’s drowning in hers. He *sees* her pain, her hope, everything in amounts impossible to understand by anyone without innumerable lifetimes of experience.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, nopony will believe that my nephew *Blueblood* is doing a real investigation. I doubt you can even begin to understand how much you helping me with this would mean to me,” she smiles.

She sounds genuinely happy. I... I can’t just say no, and for once it’s not because Blueblood would blow me up instantly if he learned I made his reputation with his aunt even worse... if it’s even possible.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he breathes out.

“I knew you’d make me proud,” she pulls him into a hug. The love instantly surging through him makes him gasp, and within the few seconds of their contact he *knows* he’s fuller than ever before in his life.

“Any idea where I can start other than by groveling before Torchlight?”

“My best idea is to talk to my assistant Raven. She’s responsible for keeping my schedule as close to achievable without time travel as possible,” Celestia chuckles, “I’ll instruct her to share everything she knows with you.”

“Thank you. Can I talk to the... victim?”

That’s where the princess shakes her head.

“No, you can’t. Last time I saw them they were badly wounded,” she wraps her wing around 1313’s head, adding in a whisper, “Be *extremely* careful. If somepony attacked Luna’s friend *inside the castle* they might have enough influence and power not to be afraid of harming you as well. Be careful whom you trust, just like I am being right now.”

Damn it, I can’t read her at all.

1313 nods.

“I’ll do what I can but I’m going to need some time to think about it.”

“Good luck,” she nods and telekinetically opens the cell door again before vanishing in a burst of golden light.

The only way she could have made this more ominous would be by adding “You’re going to need it”.

1313 sighs and leaves.

“Holy crap, you’re alive!” Zamira rushes towards him as he leaves the castle proper, “And in one piece as well.”

“Want me to break something off for you as a memento?”

“If you ever get rid of the terminal case of the kabooms, we’ll talk,” she wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, “So, what happened?”

“We have a job to do,” 1313’s expression turns grim.

“We?”

“Okay, *I* have a job to do,” he corrects himself, “First things first, any sign of the pony following us?”

“Nope.”

“Hmph,” he starts walking back towards Blueblood’s mansion.

“Don’t ‘hmph!’ me!” Zamira matches his pace immediately, “What happened? Why so serious all of a sudden?”

1313 leans down to her ear.

“I think Celestia harbored a friendly changeling drone inside the castle and someone tried to kill it to prove her politically weak and incompetent.”

“I didn’t see you react like this while changelings were being finished off in the streets.”

“We were attackers, I can understand that. However, if Celestia tried to make contact even with a stupid drone, she might have been trying to figure out a way for any potential survivors to remain survivors.”

“Oooor to simply interrogate the drone?”

1313 shakes his head.

“No, the drone was perfectly healthy and likely filled with more love than I’ve ever even seen or it wouldn’t have survived such a lethal attack.”

“I know answering this honestly might not be in your interest but is Celestia in danger from the changeling?”

1313 bursts into a crazy fit of laughter, earning an irritated frown from Zamira. When he calms down, he says:

“Only if she trips over it and falls down a long set of very hard stairs covered in spikes and anti-alicorn poison. On their own, drones are harmless... mostly.”

“Mostly? What *aren't* you telling me?”

“Didn't you want the rest of the week off?”

“Screw that! This sounds *way* more fun.”

“You're a weird zebra, you know that? Okay. I'll tell you everything I saw and you can help me by sharing all you know about Blueblood's circle of 'friends'.”

Author's Notes:

1313 is one jumpy infiltrator.

Sunbutt is scheming.

Nightguards are seething.

65536 is preparing for the Summer Sun Celebration.

I'm writing, hopefully I'll be able to finish next chapter in time.

Next up - what happens when a changeling drone eats every single type of candy available in Canterlot?

65536: 14

Nightguard barracks is well insulated, both due to location as well as actual soundproofing, so the batponies switching shifts halfway through the night could get enough rest before the Summer Sun Celebration. By evening, Sharp Biscuit is standing by the door while Steel Glimmer is at attention by the back wall, mostly invisible aside from her silvery tattoos. Pink Sunset is sleeping, hanging by the fetlocks of his hind legs in the rafters and Gloom is in her bed.

A bed that is suspiciously missing a certain ball of chitin with which she went to sleep.

Her hoof instinctively gropes the empty area around her belly where 65536 is supposed to be. On unsuccessful attempt number three to touch the changeling, Gloom's sleepy brain catches onto the inconsistency, she finally opens her eyes, and checks the alarm clock on her bedside table.

Fifteen minutes before she'd have to wake up. Excellent.

"Buggo?" the reality of the missing changeling catches up with her and she sits upright. She whispers louder, "65536?!"

"Evening, Gloom," Steel Glimmer greets her, "It-"

"65536, I know you were scared about going out but you didn't run off, did you?" Gloom openly calls out with growing worry in her voice, completely ignoring her colleague.

"NU UUH!" comes from the showers in the back despite no noise of running water.

"Are you showering?" asks Gloom.

"Already all done! I didn't want to wake you up!"

Before Gloom can call anything out again, Pink Sunset groans, opening his eyes:

“You sure did a better job than Gloom...” with a flap of his wings, he drops from the rafters on the floor.

“Blame me for being worried after our little buggo got chewed up by a weed thrasher!” Gloom frowns at him.

“Two Nightguards on duty in this room, Gloom,” Steel Glimmer peeks into the showers as she passes by, “Don’t you think we would have noticed an intruder?”

Before Gloom can reply, 65536 walks out of the showers, making her swallow her tongue as her eyes bulge.

65536’s cardboard Nightguard armor is colored to perfection, barely distinguishable from actual armor including the presumed lighter shades where it would reflect light if it was real metal. What’s new, though, is that 65536’s leg holes are filled with black paper mache, and that there’s a short mane made of dark blue and white streamers poking from under its helmet.

“Look, I even made a mane like Luna’s!”

“Hnnnnngghhh!”

“Oooh? We making funny noises? RAWRGL-HISS!”

While Gloom happily foams at the mouth with the widest smile possible for a pony, Steel Glimmer takes a deep breath while clutching her chest.

“This is *almost* making me want foals somewhere down the line...” she breathes out.

Gloom recovers as 65536 reaches her bed and she sweeps it from the floor into a hug.

“I used to foalsit for a friend a few years ago and I can assure you that you’re *waaay* better off adopting one of these if they’re at least half as

behaved as 65536.”

“There’s over ten of them in the dungeons including several drones. You can take your pick,” comments Sharp.

Steel Glimmer pauses before looking at 65536.

“Would you like to have another changeling around?” she asks with surprising hesitation.

“THAT WOULD BE AWESOME!” 65536 wiggles excitedly in Gloom’s hug, “But not a high rank, those are really mean most of the time. Not 387 or 516 or 443, though, I’ve never heard of those three kicking anyone without a good reason and they even told us weird stories about the outside from time to time. Can you magic up 72216? It could juggle with sticks it found and it made all of us laugh when one fell through its cup holders. We used to dig tunnel [*incoherent buzzing and clicking*] together but it got its hind leg crushed in a cave-in and when I dragged it off to 668 to help she told me to eat it because it was beyond saving which was nonsense because it still had three working legs and she ordered me to snap its neck and laughed when I was too weak to-”

Gloom slowly but irresistibly stops 65536’s recount by pressing its muzzle against her chest fluff to stop it from talking.

After a few moments of awkward silence that follows, Gloom quietly says:

“I’m afraid that’s a bit beyond us but I’m sure 722-uhh-16 is in a better place now where there’s nothing trying to hurt it anymore.”

“Really?” 65536 breaks its head free, “Wooo! Go, 72216, juggle as much as you can!”

“You sure you still want one?” Sharp leans over to Glimmer.

“I might, but I guess I’ll stick with what I’ve got for now,” she sighs, “So, what now, Commander? Operation cheer-up or do we go straight to investigating what happened yesterday?”

“Let’s enjoy a quick morale boost before diving into all that,” replies Sharp.

If upper Canterlot was brimming with life throughout the day so that street vendors and businesses could finish off their preparations, it had nothing on the crazy mobs of ponies filling the streets in the evening. Even the ponies from lower Canterlot who normally never visit the hanging city are here with their foals which, fortunately, is giving 65536 riding on Gloom’s back more than enough cover for the wave of excited:

“What’s *that*?!”

“A lantern show by the Chineighese. They usually rent several streets up here early. Just wait for the dragon.”

“I WANNA SEE- wait, those eat ponies, don’t they?”

“All in favor of taking Private Buzz to see the dragon?”

“Sure, why not?” Sharp Biscuit shrugs, more interested in watching the ponies around the group of Nightguards for any potential reactions to disguised 65536. So far, nothing has happened despite the drone standing on the tips of its hooves and turning its head like an overly enthusiastic periscope sticking out of the water.

“What’s *that*?!”

“That’s a griffon. Don’t point, it’s impolite.”

“What’s *that*?!”

“That’s a petting zoo. It’s filled with critters that don’t bite you and you can feed and pet them.”

“What’s that big, horny thingy?”

“That’s a minotaur.”

“What’s- AAAAH?!” 65536 immediately drops, swings around Gloom’s barrel, and remains hanging under her belly after seeing a burst of flames accompanied by heavy drumming burst out from behind a street corner in the distance.

“Thaaaat’s the dragon. Get up here or you’ll miss it,” Gloom cranes her neck under her belly to face the spooked two teal pools of 65536’s eyes.

“I dunno if I want to...”

“Nightguards can’t be scaredy cats, buddy.”

“Drones that don’t get scared easily get munched easily,” objects 65536.

“Private Buzz, you’re a Nightguard. Remember that!” Steel Glimmer leans down, simply reaches under Gloom, and spins 65536 around her barrel so that the drone’s on her back again.

“...not scared of burny roarers, not scared of burny roarers, not scared of burny-” 65536, trying to look as small as possible behind Gloom’s neck, carefully peeks out just as the chineighese long paper dragon is passing by, accompanied by drumming ponies.

WHOOOSH!

“EEP!” 65536 hides again when the heat of yet another burst of flames from the dragon’s mouth licks its carapace.

Then the dragon’s head passes them and the rest of the long body begins rolling through the street.

“Hey, it has so many legs!” 65536 swings around Gloom’s barrel again, this time to examine the dragon centipede phenomenon. It swings back around and up, “How come?”

“It’s just a representation, not a real dragon,” Steel Glimmer explains, “I’ve been to Chineigha multiple times and these snake-like dragons are traditional there, especially during their New Year celebrations. Only the

head is enchanted while the body is made of a bunch of ponies holding it up.”

“Conventions?” Sharp Biscuit winks at Glimmer.

“You have no idea how much they pay for a photo with a batpony in chainmail a bikini...” she smirks at Sharp, “Why do you think I’m the only Nightguard who never asked for a raise?”

“Hmmm, got a place for plus one for the next con?” asks Gloom, “I could use a few extra bits.”

“Sure, MILF’s a pretty popular category there.”

“I’M NOT THAT OLD!”

“I know my audience and you’re over thirty. Together, we’d pull *crowds* for the goo wrestling events. If we picked the right outfits we’d never have to work again.”

“What’s a milf?” 65536 interrupts them.

“Uhhh, mare I would like to-” Glimmer says automatically.

“-be FRIENDS with,” previously quiet Night Hunter jumps in, “That’s what the F stands for and NOTHING ELSE.”

“Yay for friendship!” 65536 throws its forelegs into the air.

“Indeed,” says Sharp, forcing a stone face, “As your CO, I’m changing the subject immediately. How about we check the food stalls?”

Gloom shakes her head.

“Let’s check the attractions up here and later fly down into lower Canterlot for food. The stuff the nobles eat up here is *pathetic* in comparison. Besides,” she reaches up to nudge 65536 who has returned to looking around in a way that would make a lighthouse jealous, “Can you even eat pony food?”

“I can taste it!” 65536 nods, “I’m not sure what happens after that but Luna gave me something called a cookie and it was delicious and I didn’t feel sick at all.”

“Sounds good to me,” Gloom shrugs, “Let’s go check out the petting zoo.”

None of the Nightguards were expecting this.

As easily as 65536 grew to accept them, they could have never expected the drone to start quietly hissing and creeping around when in presence of what they would consider to be completely harmless animals. Thankfully, the zoo owner is currently too busy with unattended foals to pay any attention to one in the presence of four Nightguards in official armors.

“What’s wrong?” asks Gloom, standing behind 65536 hesitant to move into the first enclosure.

“Those... creatures aren’t smart, right?” it shuffles backwards as a large golden retriever sticks its nose between the wooden planks of the fence to sniff the changeling.

“They’re not dangerous, see?” Sharp walks into the enclosure and starts petting the various animals that shuffle towards him.

“Maybe not to you...” 65536 mumbles, “Everything other than us or you ponies always tried to eat me.”

“Private Buzz, if anything even touches you wrong I’ll rain Tartarus fire on them and it still won’t be *anything* compared to what Luna will do if she finds out,” says Gloom, “Now get in there and hug some fluff!”

“Cardboard armor, don’t fail me now...” 65536 mutters to itself, gathering courage, and walks inside the large enclosure filled with animals.

Thud!

“AAAH HALP!” 65536 immediately finds itself under the curious retriever sniffing it before-

Mlem!

“Aaaaaaah, it’s eating me!”

Mlem mlem mlem!

“Aaaaaah! Dying tickles!”

Mlem mlem!

“Aaa- huh?” 65536 realizes that the expected pain and darkness don’t seem to be coming. No teeth either. Confused 65536 carefully pushes the dog away and stands back up on all fours to face it.

It boops the dog’s nose. The dog licks its hoof. No biting ensues.

“Pet its head,” says Sharp simply, currently busy with a kitten trying to climb on his back.

65536 rubs the dog’s head.

Woof!

“IMADEITANGRY!” 65536 jumps away. Of course, the dog takes it as a sign its new friend wants to play and starts chasing the drone. Now, a stubby, fairly slow drone compared to a dog is a done deal, and 65536 finds itself on the floor again, its ears being mercilessly licked.

At this point, 65536’s brain finally concludes that possibly not all animals are after its chewy and juicy interior.

It licks the dog’s nose.

“The turn tables!” it beams before being lightly headbutted.

“That’s not how the saying goes,” says Sharp.

“You know I don’t word good in stress!”

“Chewy! Stop bothering the little guard and come over here. This filly wants to pet you!” as the zoo manager calls out, the dog’s ears perk up and it rushes off, tail wagging.

It had so many teeth. It was as big as the drone. It could easily just snap its neck and... and...

But 65536 is still alive and it can think clearly now that the imminent threat is gone.

The monster liked me...

“Are you okay?” asks Gloom, who approached it without it noticing, “Do you want to leave?”

65536 looks around. There are a bunch of foals around, touching and petting various seemingly peaceful creatures, and no one is getting bitten.

“Are all those... really not dangerous?” it asks with hesitation, “They have claws and teeth and some are really big.”

“If you don’t threaten them, none of the animals here will do anything to you. See?” Gloom points to the retriever, whose tail is currently getting chewed up by a small foal, simply pushing the foal away with a paw, “They’re used to ponies.”

“Hay, that dog has more patience with foals than I do,” chuckles Steel Glimmer.

“Ooookay...” 65536 approaches a new monster.

A tiny one.

Fluffy, tiny one with big ears.

It’s a bunny. 65536 is warily approaching a bunny.

The ball of fur is significantly calmer than the drone capable of kicking through a steel door as well as a nightmarish dreamscape monster.

The bunny starts nibbling on 65536's paper streamer mane.

"Hey, that's mine!" the drone picks it up, "They said no eating! You were supposed to be nice!"

The bunny spits the tiny piece of paper out.

"Much better," 65536 nods, "Now I'm gonna hug you and there won't be any nibbling, okay?"

The bunny stares.

65536 puts the bunny against its neck, feeling the critter twitching and its warmth seeping through the drone's carapace.

A completely different kind of love begins trickling into it. It's not complicated like Luna's or the Nightguards', it's not... controlled like from Princess Sunbutt, and it's definitely not like the weak, processed stuff back in the hive. It's a miniscule amount but it's raw and it simply says - you're nice, I'll be nice.

Similar to the dog's, actually.

It finally hits 65536 that everything that its Nightguards friends were saying was right, it was just too afraid because of memories from home. Welp, no time like the present to examine more critters which might not be deadly.

The bunny hops down from 65536, returning to its small box.

"Gotcha," the drone nods, "Now... who's getting hugged after the hoppy thumper?"

Not even a minute later, Gloom is simply staring at the black, armored blur darting from creature to creature.

"You're a golden wagger!"

Woof!

“That’s a dog,” says Gloom, mostly to herself, really.

“Huggy noodle!”

Hiss!

“Snake.”

“Scratchy meower!”

“That’s a kitten.”

“Horny biggun!”

“I beg your pardon?” the assaulted unicorn looks around in shock.

“That’s the zoo owner,” Gloom facehoofs.

“Superfluffer!”

Baa!

“Sheep,” Sharp joins in.

“Sharpmouth clawer!”

“I. Am not. An exhibit!”

“Griffon tourist...”

“Tiny poner!”

“Hi, wanna play?”

“Thaaat’s somepony’s foal.”

“Blub blub!”

“That’s a goldfish, and put it back before it chokes!” Gloom raises her voice.

“You’re huuuuuge...” 65536’s eyes go wide when it stops in front of the biggest creature it had ever seen.

“Aaaand that’s the security,” Gloom sighs, “Private Buzz, we’re leaving.”

The present minotaur grabs 65536 by its belly and carries it over to the Nightguard group.

“Thanks,” Gloom gives him an apologetic smile and shoves 65536 onto her back.

“Hrmph...” the minotaur only frowns.

“Byyyye, twin-leg grabber!” 65536 waves at him as the group leaves the establishment.

“So... you’re saying that there are chompy burrowers inside those... and that I can smack them... and *not* get bitten?” 65536 looks from Gloom to a strange box with many holes in its top.

She sighs, looking up at the “Whack-a-mole” sign before simply nodding and telling the rather confused attraction owner:

“Three tickets, please.”

“Sure thing, Miss guard,” the unicorn smiles, presenting 3 circular metal tokens, “Put it into the slot in the side let’s see how your foal fares.”

Gloom does so.

Beep.

“Get ready, Buzz.”

Beep!

Breathe in, breathe out. Get ready to smack. Remember what they did to 55499... and 55600... and 56998... and 98966... and so many others!

BEEP!

Seconds pass.

“TASTE FOAM HAMMER, MONSTERBADDIE! WHO’S GOT A BIG STICK NOW, HUH?! HUUUH?!”

Somewhat terrifying seconds.

“EAT THAT, GUMBLEMUNCHER!”

Gloom only stands there, paralyzed.

Can’t decide if this is excitement or PTSD.

“22449 CAN FINALLY REST, YOU CUPHOLDER-LESS BLOB! WE ONLY FOUND AN EAR AND A FEW TEETH!”

She watches as the pitch of 65536’s voice rises.

No... definitely not excitement...

“THAT’LL TEACH YOU TO MAKE A CAVE-IN THAT CRUSHED FIVE OTHERS!”

Finally, it turns into venomous hissing.

“YOU’LL NEVER MUNCH ANYONE ANYMORE, WORM THING!”

Ding ding ding!

Fangs bared, thankfully covered by the paper streamer mane, 65536 is gasping for air, clutching the foam hammer, tears of pure fury streaming

from its eyes as, for the first time in its months-long life, it's not defenseless against the horrors creeping around it every moment of every day.

"That's a hundred percent, perfect score!" the owner says in a slightly detached, disbelieving tone, "You- you win a- a-"

"I think we'll just go right this instant," Gloom scoops frozen 65536 onto her back after prying the foam bat out of its forelegs.

Outside, 65536 suddenly snaps upright on Gloom's back and starts looking around.

"Huh? What happened? Where are the monsters?"

"It was just an attraction, buddy," says Gloom in as comforting a tone as she can muster while having to yell over the crowds, "You got a little bit too... *heated*."

"Oh my... I'm sorry," 65536's ears droop.

"Don't worry about it. How about we try an attraction with a little less risk of excitement?"

"Sure!"

"Hey, Buzz!" behind them, beaming Steel Glimmer nudges Night Hunter walking next to her with a small plush toy of princess Luna, "You won this."

"Really?!" 65536's eyes go saucer-wide, "It's Blue!"

"I thought the first prize was that life-sized Celestia with memory foam plot," Gloom raises an eyebrow.

"Yeees," Glimmer nods hesitantly, "but I thought it would be a great idea to not ruin the day of a pony who could potentially draw attention to our little buddy here."

"Point taken."

“Besides,” Night Hunter grabs the small plush and puts it on 65536’s back, “You already have a Celestia plush that’s hard to carry around.”

“I *must* show Blue to Luna as soon as she gets back!” 65536 crushes the plush against its chest.

Attraction number three was supposed to be simple - the maze of enchanted mirrors. The plan was to go in, laugh at some wibbly reflections, and leave. Unfortunately, stars must have aligned in some horrifying symbol of ancient evil and the one pony Gloom could complain to was gone in the dreamscape.

There’s one good thing about the current situation, which is that there seems to be a sound-dampening enchantment all over the mirror maze.

“Hi, 66598!”

“Hi, 32221!”

“Hi, uhh, what number are you?”

“Hi, 44544!”

“Hi, 99987!”

“Hi, 14226!”

“Hi, 47111!”

“Where does it get the energy to keep running around like that?” Sharp keeps observing the drone bolting from mirror to mirror, instantly switching from excitement at meeting a familiar and, *at this point Sharp is sure also probably dead*, changeling to disappointment at realizing it’s just a warped reflection of itself.

“Hi, 77166!”

“...make it stoooooop...” moans Night Hunter, holding onto Blue once again due to 65536 repeatedly dropping it out of sheer acceleration.

“You’re not ruining its fun, not after the whole whack-a-mole fiasco!” Gloom hisses at him.

“Hi, 23998!”

“Hey, Buzz,” Sharp calls out to the drone who stops in its tracks, giving him a happy, listening look, “How do you know which number is which?”

“Ohhh!” 65536 hops up and down, fake mane flailing in the air, before rushing back to Sharp and pointing at the nearest mirror showing fat 65536 sticking its tongue out at its real counterpart, “That’s 46422,” it leans closer, “umm, or 39712?” it pokes the mirror, “Goop!” it curses and chuckles to itself.

“Heeey, you have the same problem distinguishing you guys from each other that we do,” Sharp boops the drone.

“Ummm, well,” 65536 scratches its head, “I’m missing bits and pieces here, it’s tough to explain but, yeah, there’s so much more than just how we look. The mirrors are funny, though. Blblblblbl!” it sticks its tongue at a fat 65536, “Hee hee hee, I wanna see more!”

The drone runs off into the maze, leaving the Nightguards on their own.

“Should we follow it?” asks Night Hunter, “I admit I’m having trouble keeping track of where we are myself.”

“You must have missed it, Hunter, but Buzz ran off a few times already and always came back without a problem.”

“Huh...” the batpony ponders the comment, “Underground species?”

“I assume so,” Sharp nods, “I’m pretty sure it can get around with much more ease than the four of us combined.”

Thankfully, the tops of the mirror frames occasionally have small arrows carved in them just in case the guests get lost and the Nightguards eventually find 65536 near the exit.

“Ready to leave, Buzz?” asks Gloom.

“Yup,” says the drone with a hint of something strange in its voice. Something that Gloom can’t identify until they exit the building and 65536 gives the door a final look and she hears it mumble quietly:

“I hope you all get at least half as lucky as I did, wherever you are now.”

“There’s a thing!” 65536, sitting on Gloom’s back again, points across the mountainside plaza to something the batponies can’t see through the crowds everywhere. Soon, though, they start hearing an amplified voice say:

“-and in the caves of raw crystals, Daring Do, her wings still tied by the treacherous doctor Caballeron, grabbed the levitating one and let it carry her over the snapping jaws of the Python leeches-”

“Hey! Them’s toothy wrigglers! I know those!” 65536 excitedly rises on its hind legs and steps on the top of her head with its front ones.

The cardboard horseshoes make it bearable for Gloom.

“Ohhh, a puppet play,” she pushes through the last few adults, something with which her official armor helps a ton, and her field of view clears up as the only ponies remaining in front of her are several dozen foals in a half-circle around the unicorn making the enchanted puppets move around as holographic projections of various dingy catacombs or lush jungles change depending on the story.

It’s one of the classic Daring Do archetypes - an ancient artefact is somewhere, baddies want to use it, Daring Do must steal- save it, and there’s a bunch of swinging on anything hanging from anything else. Gloom isn’t particularly impressed but 65536’s excited hopping in tune

with the pegasus doll, dodging beams of light from the traps occasionally shooting into the audience, and gasping at completely predictable plot twists is what makes her day... or night.

“-and Daring Do, after all the trials, finally held the idol of the spider god Amashtummu in her hooves. However, with a deafening thud, Caballeron and his stooges finally broke through the secret wall, blocking the only exit from the temple’s inner sanctum.”

“Give us the idol, Daring Do!” growls Caballeron doll through a scimitar held in his teeth, “And I *might* make this quick.”

The Daring Do doll looks around in panic, muttering:

“What did the scroll say? Akshim- no. Askshim, varoosh, gamaboru-”

“Finally, the southern jungles will be ours!”

“NEVER!” yells Daring Do, “agum bash dmaer!”

The eyes of the small idol open, burning with green flames.

The unicorn puppet master waves his hoof, throwing a cloud of dark dust.

Poof!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAH!” the screaming of the foals fills this part of the plaza as tiny crystal spiders burst out of the cloud, jumping and crawling around over the audience.

“THE HOOVES! THEY DO NOTHING! WHY DO I GOT CUPHOLDERS?!” 65536 has its forelegs clamped over its eyes, but at some point of its panicked flailing, the paper mache hole fillings must have fallen out.

The wave of spiders vanishes with another ‘poof’, replaced by laughing of foals as the only few remaining are on the stage, carrying the dolls of Caballeron and his gang away while Daring Do holds the spider idol in victory.

“Not so fast,” she calls out to the last spider, “I could use a ride too.”

“And so,” the unicorn puppet master raises his voice, “Victorious Daring Do escaped the temple of Amashtummu with the idol which now rests in the safe vaults of the Manehattan Museum of Natural History and Magic where no evil can touch it anymore.”

Cheers rise from the audience and the hopping on Gloom’s back returns.

“WOOOOO! THAT WAS AWESOME!” 65536 yells from the top of its lungs.

Gradually, the crowd disperses as the foals swap with adults who pay for the hour of entertainment, leaving behind the unicorn fixing his dolls and resting to replenish his magic before the next performance.

As the Nightguards group up again, Gloom realizes that 65536 is lying on her back instead of its usual excited sitting and fidgeting.

“Everything okay, Private Buzz?” she asks.

“Yup, I got scared but in a good way. I had no idea that was a thing!” 65536 beams, “But there’s so many things everywhere, I dunno what to do!”

Gloom’s stomach rumbles. Three hours of attractions without food and drink, and only after water and crackers for ‘breakfast’ due to castle staff being busy with the celebration, could take a toll on a pony.

“How about we fly to lower Canterlot and check out the food?” she offers.

“Agreed,” Night Hunter nods.

“I could go for some sweets,” nods Pink Sunset who had been mostly quiet, taking in the sights of the festival and keeping an eye on any danger.

“I wonder if there are griffon mountainside vendors. I could use some jerky,” agrees Steel Glimmer.

“Then it’s settled,” Sharp nods, “Squad, time to recharge!”

Author's Notes:

Oookay, this one was supposed to be a much shorter so I'm splitting it into two parts. I hope I'm not just making something uninteresting even more bloated.

65536: 15

The Nightguards land in the first calmer alley in lower Canterlot they can find.

“So, where do we begin our foodie trip?” asks Steel Glimmer.

Unfortunately for a certain one of them whose motherly instincts have been receiving a serious awakening so far, they landed just by a plaza filled to the brim with ponies watching what seems to be a light show judging by the blasts of colors swirling through the air, which means only one thing:

“EEEEEE! SO MANY FLOATY SHINIES!” 65536 exclaims, bursts of various colored lights reflecting in its eyes.

“Wait-!” Gloom’s words are drowned out by the overall noise of the Summer Sun Celebration.

With one, albeit careful, bounce off of Gloom’s head, 65536 charges forward before she can react, vanishing between the legs of ponies filling the plaza.

“Craaaap!” with a curse, Sharp rushes forward, shoving ponies aside, “Official business! Clear the way, citizens, clear the way!”

“Where could Buzz be?” asks Gloom with no particular target for that question in mind.

“The shiniest thing around is the damn stage!” replies Pink Sunset, pushing through right next to her.

“That’s the *last* thing we need right now!” she growls.

“AND NOW, FOR THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE’S MOST ROYAL OF PERFORMANCES - THE LUNAR ECLIPSE!” shrieks the

blue mare on stage so incredibly loud that she outcries the mob around, standing on her hind legs with her forelegs pointing at the sky, “BEHOLD!”

Something clicks in the back of the stage, quickly followed by the noise of two gears grinding together and getting stuck. The crowd goes silent and waits.

“Official business, coming through!” is the only audible thing for the next two seconds.

“B-BEHOLD!” repeats the stage magician with much less certainty. The crowd begins snickering, until they all unite in a solid:

“Booooo!”

The white-maned, blue unicorn mare on the stage looks around in sudden panic before her eyes lock on a small equine hopping up on the stage via a short set of stairs on the side.

“Where did all the shinies go?” asks 65536, looking up at the once again black sky.

“YOU, TRIXIE’S ASSISTANT! GET OVER HERE!” the stage magician calls out to 65536.

“Noooooooo...” Gloom, roughly two thirds of the way to the stage, freezes in utter disbelief.

Blue aura of magic envelops 65536, lifting the drone up as it starts giggling and waving its legs in the air.

“...buck buck buck buck...”

“DUE TO, EHM, TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES-” Trixie quickly improvises, “THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE WILL POSTPONE HER ORIGINAL FINISHING ACT AND PLAY ON YOUR DEEPEST FEARS WHILE YOU REGRET YOUR RECENT LAUGHTER AND BOOING!”

“Boooooooooo!”

“Wheeeee!” 65536 keeps floating around her.

“...buck buck buck buck...”

“WITH MAGIC SO BEYOND YOUR GRASP THAT UNICORNS AMONG YOU WILL NOT FEEL OR DETECT IT, THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE WILL TRANSFORM HER ASSISTANT INTO THE FORM FROM YOUR WORST NIGHTMARES!” her telekinesis grips 65536’s helmet, “BEHOLD, THE FACE OF THE PUREST EVIL!” sideways, she quietly hisses at 65536, “...just growl or something and we’ll get both out with our hides intact...”

“...buck buck buck buck...”

She removes 65536’s helmet.

“...buuuuuuuuck...”

The crowd gasps.

“EVEN THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE ISN’T SURE HOW LONG SHE CAN HOLD THE BEAST CONTAINED!”

She lets 65536 go.

Somepony in the crowd screams and faints.

The drone looks around, waves at the constantly cursing Gloom now stuck in the middle of the unresponsive crowd.

“Raaaawr!” 65536 waves its forelegs in the air with a huge smile, “I can hiss too, look! Hisssss!” it closes its eyes, hissing, “I can make more noises! RAWRGL-HISSSSSS!”

The Nightguards have no idea what to do, their blood turning to ice in their veins.

Until *somepony* calls out from the top of their lungs:

“WOOOO! EXCELLENT WORK! I FELT ABSOLUTELY NO MAGIC!”

The crowd turns its head to the single, tall, white, blond-maned unicorn stallion responsible for the cheering.

“AMAZING!” he starts stomping the ground.

“Me neither!” calls out a different unicorn, which is followed by more and more agreeing out loud.

Gloom’s blood flow resumes when, one by one, the ponies in the crowd join the cheering and stomping.

“MORE APPLAUSE FOR MY AMAZING ASSISTANT!” Trixie adds before jumping into the crowd that lets her crowd-surf across their backs.

“Wheeeee!” 65536 joins in, hopping over back after back towards Gloom until-

-a striped foreleg snatches it from a pony’s back and Gloom loses sight of the drone.

“...buuuuuuuuuuck...”

“WOOO, COGHT ‘NOTHR!” yells an obviously completely wasted muscular zebra mare accompanying the originator of the cheering - the unicorn currently telekinetically holding a big mug of something alcoholic, “EEEEVL CHONGBLONG!”

The crowd around them bursts out into laughter and, to the relief of the Nightguards, starts losing interest in 65536 and talking to each other about the performance.

As for 65536, it momentarily ponders some sort of new, strange whispering at the edge of its hearing or inside its head entirely but can’t understand it no matter what. Besides, trying to force anything only leads to a minor headache, so 65536 stops focusing on the phenomenon. The drone squeaks

as it gets telekinetically pulled out of the zebra's hooves and finds itself face to face with the tall unicorn.

"Rawr!" it beams at him before sticking its tongue out, "Pplplp! Different scary noise!"

The unicorn smirks before reaching out, patting its head, and then sliding his hoof over its back, stopping when he reaches the cardboard Nightguard back plate, and moving his foreleg lower to rub its belly between the straps of the faux armor instead.

"Are you feeling okay?" asks the unicorn once he's done with his examination.

"NEVER BEEN BETTER!" 65536 excitedly calls out, "EVERYONE IS SUPER NICE, ESPECIALLY LUNA, NOT-BLUE, PRINCESS SUNBUTT, AND THE FLUFFY-EARED PONIES!"

"Fluffy-eared p-?"

"Official business, coming through!" rings through the crowd.

The unicorn turns his head and says:

"I see who you mean."

Sharp Biscuit stops in front of the unicorn, his face carefully controlled and his tone flat and as official as he can muster.

"Your Highness, I-" is all he can say before the unicorn interrupts him.

"Excellent illusion for a common stage magician, wasn't it?" Blueblood levitates 65536 onto Sharp Biscuit's back before turning around and pulling at the ear of the zebra swaying unsteadily next to him, "Come, Zamira. We still have a lot to experience."

Once they're out of the plaza, Zamira stumbles into Blueblood.

"Wazzat a reel buggo or am I to- too drunksh?"

“Both. Definitely both.”

“Shud wee do... sumshin?”

“More jello shots, maybe?”

Zamira’s unfocused eyes go wide.

“SEE? DES WAI YOO MY FAVOSH BUGGOS! ALL FIVE OF OF YA!” she lunges at Blueblood’s neck, missing entirely and faceplanting into a street lamp.

“You complete, *utter*, silly, little, unbelievably lucky-”

“Evvvveryyyyyyythinnnnng woobbbbleeeesssss...” 65536’s eyes cross as it finds itself being held and relentlessly shaken by teared-up Gloom throwing out a stream of adjectives at it.

“How could you think that running off was a smart idea?! What were you thinking? WERE you thinking?”

“...dizzyyyyyyyyyyy...”

“Gloom, let the little guy breathe-”

“RAWRGL-HISS AT YOU IN A NON-ADORABLE WAY, COMMANDER!” she shoots Sharp a not entirely sane glance.

“Oooh-kay...” he backs off, “Glims, a little help?”

“Don’t look to me for disturbing somepony overdosing on mothering instincts, Commander.”

“Hunter?”

“There’s nothing more dangerous than a mare protecting her foal. Despite the obvious differences here, I’m not getting close without one of those

enchanted paladin full plate armors.”

“Pink, please? Before she shakes the life out of Buzz?”

“Gloom?” Pink Sunset takes a step towards Gloom who shoots him a bloodshot glare this time.

“Grrrrrrrr...!”

“I understand that you’re upset, but-”

“Upset? UPSET?! WE’RE IN A CITY WHERE NOT EVEN TWO WEEKS AGO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SKEWERED BY-”

“And you screaming these things out loud and holding Buzz for everypony to see is helping how?” Sunset tilts his head, “Besides, I don’t know what *they* throw up but you’re halfway to finding out.”

“Hrrrrrr...” 65536 clamps its forelegs over its mouth.

“And the cupholders will just make the stream more accurate,” he adds.

“A-hem,” Gloom clears her throat with only the tiniest hint of shame, and puts 65536 down where it wobbles unsteadily around on the spot, “I *may* have gotten a little carried away-”

“A little-” Sharp makes a mistake.

“Shut up!” and so does Gloom, one which she realizes when met with Sharp Biscuit’s raised eyebrow, “Ehm, I mean, shut up, Commander. With all due respect, of course.”

“That’s better,” Sharp nods, “Now, how about we all calm down and agree that if Buzz here tries to run off again it will get its little hooves *stapled* together.”

“Ugh...” 65536 sits down to stop the world from spinning.

“Agreed!”

“Definitely!”

“Yep.”

“If it’s an order...”

“Eeeep!” 65536 freezes, getting rather nasty flashbacks to whenever it used to be scrutinized by a high rank.

This time, the high rank is *extremely* angry.

“Private-on-probation Buzz,” Gloom stands over 65536, “For the rest of tonight, you will not leave my sight. Understood?”

Wobble attempt?

“NO WIBBLING! I’M TOO FURIOUS FOR WIBBLING!”

The flashbacks get *worse*.

.elbbiW

“Do you understand?”

Nod nod nod!

“What do you understand?”

“NotleaveyoursightMissGloom!”

“Good. And what happens to bad *privates* who disobey?”

“Theydon’tgetfedortheygetrecycledorjustgointothecrusher!” 65536 is shaking now.

“Great... now *I* feel awful,” she sighs, sits down, and picks 65536 up, “Look, I was so *terrified* when you ran off into the middle of a crowd full of ponies. I don’t want you to get hurt. Got it, you little idiot?”

Nod nod nod.

“But you still need to be punished so the lesson sticks,” she frowns, “If you do something this stupid again, no candy for you.”

“Those burning things? Luna didn’t want me eating those anyway. They’re mushy but not stingy mushy like soap.”

“How do you know that?” asks Sharp.

“I only licked one!”

“Can-dy, not can-dle,” Gloom raises her voice, “That’s like...” she pauses, “Who do you like the most?”

“Luna!” 65536 replies immediately, “Her love is super special.”

“And do you like my- our love?”

“Yup!”

“But you like Luna’s more, right?”

“Yup!”

“So... think of candy as the better kind of love but not healthy.”

“Uhhh...”

“Different worlds, Gloom. Different worlds,” Sharp shakes his head, “I think that a practical demonstration is in order.”

“Agreed,” says Night Hunter, “But seriously, *Buzz*, don’t run off no matter what. If you want to try or see something, ask us and we’ll come with you. That’s what we’re here for, after all.”

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” 65536’s ears droop.

“You’re on probation and that’s the end of it. We’re not about to keep giving you Tartarus for the rest of the night,” Sharp glances Gloom’s way,

“Anypony got an idea where to start with, as Glimmer called it, our foodie trip?”

“The majority of the vendors should be on Spiral Avenue,” says Glimmer, “We can clip it and then turn towards the mountainside to visit the griffon shop I talked about.”

“Sounds like a plan. Is everypony on board with that?” Sharp looks around at the nodding group, “Good. Lead the way, Glims.”

Spiral Avenue is, in contrast to its name, the main street of lower Canterlot, leading from the outer gates *directly* towards the road spiraling around the entire mountain and connecting the upper city that’s halfway up and the lower city at the mountain’s base. Currently it’s, just like the upper city, filled with vendors, food stalls, and cheaper attractions mostly designed for earth ponies and pegasi. Tourists from all over Equestria and beyond are welcome to shop around and enjoy themselves, and the crowds are much more diverse than in the upper city where the majority of them were unicorns.

“APPLES, CANDIED APPLES, APPLE PIES, APPLE FRITTERS, APPLIED APPLES!” calls out one of so many voices ringing everywhere around that 65536 could almost believe it’s inside the hive again, this one slurred by a strange, drawn-out accent.

“Applied apples?” Pink Sunset looks directly at a brownish-orange mare with blond mane wearing a stetson operating a rather well-done modular mobile cart filled with, by the smell of it, apple products.

“Exactly!” somehow, the mare heard him and replies with a wide smile, “They’re apples from trees that are only watered by apple cider stored in barrels made of apple wood, all produced by the Apple family,” she presents her wares.

“Isn’t that, like, cannibalism?” Sunset snickers, getting a stink-eye from the mare in response before she smiles her professional, business smile again.

“Excellent joke, Mister Guard. Now, is there anything Ah can offer to you or...” she trails off, circling her fetlock in the air.

“A candied apple, please,” Gloom shoves Pink Sunset aside.

“One cand- is that a changeling on yet back, if ya don’t mind me asking?” she narrows her eyes.

“A stage illusionist cast a spell on my friend’s foal and it- he now looks like that. Not sure how long it’ll last,” Gloom shrugs, “Hiss at the nice mare, private Buzz, would you?”

“Hisss, woOoOoO!” 65536 waves its forelegs, “I’m totally spooookyyyy.”

The mare visibly relaxes and shoves an apple on a wooden stick into a vat of some sticky, semi-liquid mess.

“How about one of your appled apples candied in apple sauce?” snickers Pink Sunset, “You can call it apple cubed.”

“Har har,” the mare rolls her eyes and presents the candied apple to Gloom, “There ya go, ma’am. That’ll be five bits.”

Gloom presents the coins to the mare and gives the received treat to 65536 who carefully sniffs it from all sides as the Nightguards resume walking.

65536 licks it, its eyes going wide.

And finally bites down on it.

“Uh oh...” 65536 shakes its head vigorously, the apple stuck in its mouth, “Mmphmhpmp!”

“Next time try a smaller bite?”

“MMMPHHP!”

“Do you need help?” asks Sharp, walking by Gloom’s side and watching the drone’s attempts to ineffectively pull the apple out of its mouth by the

stick.

“Nngh!” 65536 shakes its head.

A short burst of minty scent later, 65536 manages to bite down and swallow half of the apple in one go.

“Wooh, much better,” it pauses, “I can’t taste much of it over my venom.”

“That’s because you swallowed like a python,” replies Gloom, “Take small bites and either chew properly or suck it for a while.”

Nom nom nom!

“Hey! That’s delicious,” 65536 resumes looking around while nibbling on the rapidly disappearing apple.

Out of nowhere, Gloom says:

“Buzz, hop on the Commander’s back for a moment.”

The moment she feels 65536’s weight leave her back, she vanishes into the crowd. Sharp and Sunset exchange glances but Gloom returns in a few moments with a small pack from which she pulls out a green sphere and presents it to 65536.

“You want one?”

The drone sniffs it before tensing up and scowling.

“Oookay,” Gloom shrugs, “I guess sour candy isn’t everypony’s thing,” she raises her hoof to put the green candy into her mouth.

“Noooooo!” 65536 suddenly reaches out from Sharp’s back, attempting and failing to swat it out of Gloom’s hoof, “That’s melty muncher spit! You can’t-” 65536 pauses when Gloom’s mouth fails to dissolve amidst terrifying screaming and gurgling, “What? Why aren’t you screaming and exploding? Are you ponies melt-proof?” it tilts its head with visible suspicion.

Gloom just offers the drone the bag again.

“It’s just sour candy, it’s not acid. Look,” she pops another soft candy into her mouth.

“Technically-”

“I swear to Luna, Hunter, if you finish that thought I’ll bucki-” she glares not daggers but a single griffon two-hander Night Hunter’s way before realizing 65536 is around and swallowing the curse, “be *extremely* unpleasant to you for the next few weeks.”

65536 looks at Sharp who simply nods.

“She’s not acid-proof, buddy. Try it.”

The drone narrows its eyes, pulling out a piece of candy from the bag, sniffing it from all sides, and giving it a lick.

“AAAH! MY TONGUE IS MELT-nngh” it sticks its tongue out and crosses its eyes to examine it. The strange sensation vanishes quickly and 65536’s tongue flicking in the air remains undissolved, “Whuh?”

“Told you,” Sharp smirks.

Finally gathering courage, 65536 pops the candy into its mouth.

“EEEE! MY WHOLE MOUTH FIZZLES!”

“Want another?” Gloom wiggles her eyebrows.

“YESYESYESYESYESFIZZLERSARETHEBEST!” it snatches the bag from Gloom’s hooves.

“Don’t shove it all into your- too late,” she sighs as 65536 starts foaming, its tongue repeatedly lapping the sizzling drool dripping from its mouth.

“Are you okay?”

“Blrblrblrblrbrlllblr!” 65536 nods.

“Welp,” Gloom shrugs as bubbles start coming out of the drone’s nose too and it starts sneezing, “I guess we can go look for something else to try out.”

“Blrrblrrlllr- achoo! Blrlrblr!”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

With twitching 65536 riding on Sharp’s back, Gloom takes the lead, looking at more potentially interesting kinds of candy to taste.

Several minutes later, 65536 finally stops foaming and sneezing. After a moment of gasping for breath and recovery, it points to a stall ahead:

“That pony is making pink clouds!”

“Ah, a cotton candy machine,” Sharp identifies 65536’s target, “Not exactly my thing but let’s check it out.”

As they’re waiting in queue, 65536 can’t help but be mesmerized by the pink fluff swirling around and around in the closest of the three vats on the big machine/vendor’s stall’s counter.

It stares and stares and stares.

And sways, sways, sways, and keels over.

“Oh shi-” Sharp turns around as the weight from his back slips away.

“BLRLBRLBRLB-IT’S LIKE CANDY AND THE SPINNER THINGY AT THE SAME TIME-BLRLBRLB!”

By the time the terrified stall owner, assisted by Sharp, pulls 65536’s head out of the vat, it’s completely covered by a cloud of pink fluff.

Two blobs in the front of the pink ball move up, revealing 65536’s teal eyes.

NOM!

A chunk of the cotton candy gets sucked into its mouth, revealing an excited grin.

“THAT WAS FUN! CAN I GO AGAIN?”

“Whatever else happens tonight, I’m going to die a happy mare,” whispers Gloom, jingling a pouch of gold on a string in front of 65536, “This is our budget. Buy *anything* you want.”

Night Hunter, standing behind Gloom, asks:

“Are you sure? You could rent an apartment down here for that much-”

Strangely enough, the heavily muscular stallion finds himself in an irresistible one-foreleg lock, his nose scrunched against Gloom’s.

“Don’t. Take. This. From. Me!” she hisses before shoving him away. Turning back to 65536 currently busy ripping chunks out of the cotton candy covering its head and loading it into its mouth on an industrial level, she adds, “So, what do you want to eat next?”

“Mhmmmmhh!”

“Don’t worry. Just point,” she smiles.

“Mhmmyaaaaaaymhm!”

And so, the changeling hive is finally victorious, devouring everything in Canterlot.

Well, the one hive representative currently present.

And everything candy-related on Spiral Avenue.

Details. Details.

The next hour finds the group sitting inside the griffon bistro recommended by Steel Glimmer. The owner brings them a bowl of mixed dried jerky from which Glimmer immediately grabs a piece and starts chewing.

Night Hunter picks a piece as well, sniffing it and coughing.

“Whoah! I’m gonna need something stronger to wash this off with,” he looks at the griffon, “Got any Stalliongrad vodka?”

“Nope, only our stuff,” he shakes his head, “Since you’re new here, I’d recommend Drachenberg Distilled. It packs a punch despite being surprisingly low on alcohol.”

“Sounds good.” Hunter nods and the griffon walks off, quickly returning with a plate containing five glasses and putting one down for each of the Nightguards.

“Anything for the colt?” he asks, giving a look to 65536 sitting between Gloom and Night Hunter and sniffing a strip of beef jerky.

“Hmmm...” Gloom examines the menu inside a stand at the center of the round table.

65536 shoves the strip into its mouth and chews for a few seconds.

“EEEEP?!” its eyes bulge, and by now the Nightguards are familiar enough with the drone’s reactions to know it’s not the usual excitement.

“What’s-?!” asks Gloom.

65536 grabs Night Hunter’s big glass of griffon vodka and downs it in one go.

“Pheeeeew! That tasted like fire!” it breathes out. Faced with shocked stares of everyone around, the drone scratches its head nervously, “Why is everyone looking at me? Did I do something?”

“Are you feeling alright?” asks Gloom.

“My mouth burns a bit but yeah. I’m not sure I want that chewy stuff, though,” it looks at the griffon owner, “Sorry.”

“Note to self,” comments Sharp, “No drinking contests with the recruit.”

“Welp, another glass, if you will,” Night Hunter breaks the stunned silence.

“Got anything sweet to drink?” asks Gloom.

“Traditional Griffonstone mead, Miss,” he says, “We even have a non-alcoholic version.”

“A tankard of that then, if we’re going full *traditional*.”

“Sure thing,” the griffon trots off again.

After starting off with the jerky and several drinks, the Nightguards finally enjoy a full meal while 65536 nurses its mead. Surprisingly, 65536 is mostly quiet, listening to the casual chatting of everyone about their lives, the incoming shift schedule, and the overall situation regarding Canterlot.

Eventually it’s time to leave, and the group does exactly that.

“So, how was it?” asks Steel Glimmer.

“Gotta admit it wasn’t half bad,” Hunter nods appreciatively, “A bit of an acquired taste, definitely, but I might make this a regular thing.”

The overall agreement is interrupted by a loud growl from 65536, namely its belly.

“Is everything okay?” asks Gloom.

“Hmmm,” 65536 cranes its neck to frown at its belly, “I’m not sure,” more growling and gurgling, “Ah!” it looks around and disappears behind a trash can for a moment.

The group hears-

“Hurk-blargh!”

-before 65536 returns, saying:

“All good now!”

“I’m starting to think that this guy could digest concrete,” Pink Sunset snickers.

“What’s that?” 65536 looks up at him, “A new kind of candy?”

“Building material.”

“You build stuff out of candy?!”

“No-”

“That’s just like us!”

“Uhh, what?”

“Yeah! We make love-infused goop and reinforce cracks with it. We can even make it glow and stuff!”

Quiet hissing from behind the trash cans immediately stops the conversation as the Nightguards go to examine as a group, finding a blob of pink goop sizzling and sputtering while slowly sinking into the ground...

...through solid flagstones.

Sharp pushes the trash can over the hole.

“I think we’re overstaying our welcome,” he says after whistling innocently.

“You’re truly a moral compass for us all, Commander!” Glimmer salutes.

Returning back on Spiral Avenue, Gloom stops by a seemingly random stall and presents 65536 with a strange, slippery bag.

65536 experimentally nibbles on it without any result.

“Bleh, tastes weird. What is this, a pillow? It’s pretty soft.”

“My mistake,” she takes it back and rips off the top of the bag separated by a line of perforation, “The candy is inside.”

Presented with a now open bag, 65536 reaches inside and pulls out a solitary small, white, extremely soft cylinder.

Step two.

Nom!

65536 chews.

Its jaw drops.

“THIS IS THE BEST THING EVER!” it blurts out, spitting the half-chewed up candy accidentally out past Gloom reflexively leaning to the side.

“Those are marshmallows.”

65536, sitting on Sharp’s back, holding the small bag with its hind legs and reaching inside with both forelegs, shovels two hooffuls into its mouth.

“Shmellows!”

“No, marshmallows,” Gloom corrects it.

65536 shoves the remaining contents of the bag into its mouth in one swoop, quickly chews everything up, and gulps down.

“More shmellows!” it cheers.

As instructed, Gloom rushes off, accompanied by snickering from Sunset and Sharp. This time, however, she returns with the same style of a strange bag, although one bearing 'FAMILY SIZE!' print in colorful letters.

65536 immediately rips into it like a buzzsaw into soft wood.

"So, I'm guessing these are a success," comments Gloom with a smile.

Nom nom nom nom!

"WITHOUT THE CARAPACE, IT'S LIKE EATING HUGS AND CUDDLES!"

Nom nom nom nom!

Ponies, attracted by 65536 yelling, begin converging towards the marshmallow vendor, much to the unease of the Nightguards. Thankfully, nopony seems to be paying much attention to the actual identity of the yelling "foal".

"I want a bag!"

"Same here!"

"Two bags, please!"

"If that foal loves it so much, I need three! Village-sized!"

Suddenly completely swarmed by business, the vendor calls out over the other voices:

"Miss, Miss, Miss guardspony!"

"Yes?" Gloom walks over and gets a family-size bag for free.

"Thanks for this!" is all the vendor can say before Gloom gets pushed away by a growing crowd of ponies surrounding the stall.

With a shrug, she returns to the others.

On Sharp's back and holding a freshly open bag that's close to half of the drone's own size with its hind legs again, 65536 extends its forelegs

towards Gloom's bag.

"No!" Gloom pulls it away from 65536's legs.

NUCLEAR WIBBLE!

"You haven't even finished the first bag!" objects Gloom. A critical mistake.

65536 grabs the bottom of its bag, puts the open side to its mouth, unhinges its jaw, and simply *shoves* with its forelegs as hard as it can. Its cheeks and throat bulge.

"MHHMHMO HOOOWEMHMHM!"

"Whatever that was supposed to mean, no," Gloom leans away in a mix of amazement and disgust.

65536 *tries* to wibble again, but the gesture fails completely since it can't close its mouth due to the incredible mass of 'shmellows'.

With the constant fidgeting accompanied by the sounds of someone apparently trying to chew up a particularly lively slinky, Sharp leisurely follows Gloom through the streets until they reach a smaller plaza filled with dance music.

Dunn dunn dunn dunn!

"Huh, an outside rave," Steel Glimmer is the first one to identify the occasion.

Dun dun dun!

Nom nom nom! 65536 begins chewing in rhythm with the music.

Dududududu! the drumbeat quickens.

Nomnomnomnomnom- HAAAAAH!

65536 gasps for breath as it finally manages to chew through the fluffy mass in its mouth, successfully depositing everything into its now visibly bloated belly.

“Hey, those ponies are sniffing sugar through their noses!” it points in the direction of several mares, “I didn’t know that was a thing. Can we get some?”

“Sugar through-?” Gloom freezes, “Nooooope! Nope nope nope nope! We’re leaving. NOW!”

“Should I go sort it out?” Night Hunter glances Sharp’s way.

“Can’t we let it slide just for tonight?” Steel Glimmer chimes in.

Sharp looks around before shrugging.

“We’re off duty. Let them have their fun. If we find an active patrol, we can mention it to them.”

He feels a hoof on his backside as Gloom begins pushing him away from the rave.

65536’s stomach *RUMBLES*.

“That didn’t sound good-” she looks up at the drone clutching its belly.

“BURRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRP!”

“Sweet stars above!” Sharp clamps a hoof over his nose as a visible cloud of strange, semi-sweet scent rolls over his head.

Steel Glimmer nudges 65536, offering it a mint chewing gum.

“You know what? Take three, just in case.”

Nom nom nom

Gulp!

“You weren’t supposed to *eat* those...” Glimmer facehoofs, earning a second smack to the back of her head from Gloom.

“And how was it supposed to know?”

“H-eep?!” 65536 freezes, “What was th-eep??!”

“Eeeeeeeee!” Gloom clops her hooves together, “Even the hiccups are adorable!”

Heep?!

The confused and visibly distraught drone keeps looking around.

Heep?!

“Sorry,” Steel Glimmer reaches out towards 65536 before freezing and stating flatly, “No, nope. I refuse. This is too adorable to be real...”

Heep?!

A heart-shaped bubble made of chewing gum and whatever mess 65536’s stomach concocted slowly floats through the air.

Heep?!

Another one, prompting a confused look from the drone itself.

Heep?!

More and more.

“IT’S SO CUTE I’M GONNA DIE!” Gloom grabs Sharp by his shoulders and begins shaking him which, of course, makes the situation so much worse for 65536 on his back.

Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!

“How many more are in the dungeons?! I *NEED* ANOTHER ONE! NO, ANOTHER TEN!”

Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!

“Stop-!”

Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!

“-shaking-!”

Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!

“-me-!”

Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!Heep?!

“NEVER! I NEED ALL OF THEM IN MY LIFE!”

...heep...

The interval between the quiet, exhausted, squeaky hiccups has been lengthening for the past fifteen minutes since the Nightguards decided that returning to the castle was the only option and Gloom irresistibly took 65536 on her back again. After all, the whole trip happened to cheer 65536 up after the assassination attempt and the drone’s current inability to do anything other than twitch and squeak every few seconds put a rough stop to everything.

...heep...

Thankfully, at this time of night and due to the celebration, the castle is *deserted* so there’s no pony who would give the drone limply lying on Gloom a second look as they head towards the Nightguard barracks again.

...heep...

“Say what you want, I’m gonna miss the bubble hearts,” says Gloom as she lays the drone down on her bed.

“Unnngh...” 65536 groans at her, “More chewing g- heep?!”

“Yeeeah, I wouldn’t risk it any time soon. I’ll just have to live without it,” Gloom pats the drone’s head, “Since drinking water or trying to spook you didn’t help, let’s try to sleep it off... if possible.”

“Mhm...”

In the back of the room, Sharp Biscuit is talking to Night Hunter and Steel Glimmer in a hushed tone.

“I wish I knew where you should start but I don’t. This one is entirely up to you. I know you’ll officially be off-duty but I want a quick report every day even if it reads ‘Nothing happened’. Got it?”

The two Nightguards nod.

“Commander,” says Steel Glimmer, “Can you get us the Guard shift schedule from last night for the whole castle? That might start us off *somewhere*. I honestly doubt the assassin got inside uninvited.”

“Talk to Darky about that. She’s the one managing our schedules so she has to know who we’re patrolling with during the nights even if they’re Royal Guards,” replies Sharp, “If you need bits, I can scrounge up some funds from the Nightguard reserves, just don’t try telling me later your investigation led you to Las Pegasus.”

The two Nightguards smirk, exchange glances, and both glance at the exhausted little drone on Gloom’s bed.

...heep...

“Don’t worry about that, Commander,” says Night Hunter, “Just one question.”

“Out with it.”

“Is there *any* chance that Gloom’s... reaction to 65536 is unnatural?”

“You mean that it’s influencing her?” Steel Glimmer looks at him with a mix of surprise and irritation that this didn’t occur to her at all.

Sharp takes a deep breath and ponders the situation with his eyes closed for a few moments before answering:

“One, I don’t think it would fool Luna. Two, if I swap a changeling for a pony in my mind and then look at what I’ve seen of it so far... then no. My mind and my heart agree that 65536 is genuinely happy here, possibly for the first time ever. And finally - damn, Hunter, if they all could be like this then they wouldn’t have needed to invade anything,” he chuckles, shaking his head, “We’d all be lining up with sweets and hugs.”

With a final nod from both Hunter and Glimmer, the two Nightguards exit the barracks. Hearing Gloom and Sunset in the showers, Sharp sits down on Gloom’s bed next to 65536 and puts a hoof on its head.

“Did you enjoy tonight? I mean, besides the hiccups.”

65536 pulls Sharp’s hoof towards its nose and nuzzles it.

“...best night ever...”

Author's Notes:

Loooooong! I don't know what else to say here, really. No real plot, just huggery. Hope this was enjoyable and recharged the happy gauge to last through the serious parts.

Today we learned:

- drones are magic, screw everything.
- never get into a drinking contest with a changeling. (It might end up with you losing the kingship of a dwarf city)
- Trixie is a quick thinker, if nothing else.

Now let 65536 get some well-earned rest and let's have a look at what the others are doing.

CH: 9/13 - Carapace

Chrysalis has to admit that the simple physical exertion of pulling a cart with two recovering changelings curled up on it, after centuries of mostly just lounging around and giving mental orders, feels strangely relaxing.

She's been avoiding another trip into the hive mind, her argument being that she wounded both warriors rather heavily and they were in no position to pull the cart, which was...

...obviously a lie. Their wounds were rather harsh but would do little to prevent them from doing their job.

It was because every time I thought about it my legs started shaking again.

Thankfully, warriors heal easily so the seemingly terrifying wounds she inflicted on both of them during her last dive into the hive memories are now mostly closed, the incinerated chitinous armor replaced by smoother, fresh, skin-like carapace.

As her thoughts turn to them, the warriors wake up as one, their hive links growing stronger.

"So, I asked you two before my last dive - how does the cycle of changeling failure end?"

96 politely waits for 68 to talk first. For once, the higher rank isn't particularly happy about it.

"I'm waiting..." Chrysalis stops walking and takes off the goo-fixed harness.

"We, ummm, win? And, uhh, take enough territory over with... a good amount of ponies to feast on?" is the best 68 can say.

“96, a different answer that won’t make me want to tie the heaviest rock I can find to my neck and jump into the ocean, will you?”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” 96 hangs his head, “I think 68 is right. Before the invasion, it might have been possible to... use diplomacy or something, maybe present our case, but now? I think we either win in 68’s way, maybe after several more decades of waiting back in the hive, or we eventually lose everything.”

“I see...” Chrysalis pauses before completely changing the topic, “Harness up. I’ll try to take another dip into the hive memories. Two days was enough.”

“Welcome back, Chrysalis. Glad to see you finally grew a pair.”

Chrysalis steels her mind the second the voice echoes through her brain, but the trembling returns. Gritting her teeth and growling at the empty blackness earns her only a round of quiet laughter.

“We’ll meet soon enough. Now go visit Carapace, I’m sure you’ll enjoy seeing the worst our race has to offer.”

For the first time, Chrysalis has zero control over the hive mind shifting around her and spitting her out in the past. Some kind of a *hive* in the past in fact. The walls, however, aren’t the roughly hewn corridors barely holding together with resin she knows from the Badlands. These are proper *halls*, angular and filled with carvings of...

Chrysalis tilts her head and scrunches her muzzle as she inspects one.

“Drones... running away from some kind of a giant worm?” she mutters to herself while walking forward and examining the depicted events.

There’s much more. Worms, giant bats, balls of teeth, spikes, ravines, carvings dotting the walls as far as the eye can see. Without too close of an inspection, they do paint a picture of class and history.

How much do I really know about what's in the depths under the Badlands?

“Waaaaaaaait...” she can't stop herself from turning her head as she spots something rather different from the corner of her eye on the opposite wall.

In disbelief, she stops and stares, because this section is rather different, showing the same picture countless times, only with tiny differences. A changeling and a pony are always looking at each other while between them there's a number of lines and symbols, some of which Chrysalis *can* actually recognize.

“I don't believe this.”

Changeling - a ball - number of lines - pony.

Changeling - a horseshoe - different number of lines - pony.

Changeling - a sword or knife - large number of lines - pony.

Changeling - a helmet - some spiral symbol - pony.

And dozens- possibly hundreds more.

“Is this a... price list?!”

There must be more to this. Why would changelings with access to the hive mind need this?

Then it hits her as she returns to the part of the wall where the list of underground threats fluidly shifts to the shopping prices. Neither the sizes of the monsters or the ponies aren't exaggerated, these are all *drones*.

Grandma's rules - to save love, don't overload the hive mind with unnecessary nonsense. It's easier to breed new drones once the old ones die rather than retaining information on non-invasive natural threats. It must have been similar in the old days. These are instructions from drones to drones who will come after them.

Makes me wonder how many of these are down under the Badlands.

“Okay, now this is here just to make me feel bad, right...?” she sighs.

The next section depicts drones missing limbs, specific sections of carapace, and the ways of dealing with the wounds. The one Chrysalis is currently looking at is a close-up of a drone fetlock missing a hoof which is replaced by some porous rock, presumably some specific light kind she can't exactly identify, and the proper placement of goo to glue the two parts together with the least amount of inconvenience.

Ah, there's the part of the wall showing where the rock can be found. Apparently it's something magmatic from ravines deep underground.

Before she can facehoof at some of the many rather terrifying homemade "medical" treatments, a round of boisterous laughter echoes through the halls, and she decides to follow it.

She must have landed near the throne room, either that or this particular hive is rather small. However, if there's something that she won't be able to get from the walls then it's the map of the hive. That is something every changeling must have access to at any time, and showing it to any potential intruder borders on treason.

A stab of jealousy makes her pout as she spots what she presumes to be the gate to the throne room. It's made of wood decorated with silver and glowing resin, and apparently made by someone who clearly had no idea what they were doing and didn't know the meaning of subtlety. The green, bioluminescent resin is casting a soft shimmer on a picture of a rather slender queen, likely an infiltrator one, her horn glowing green and connected to many changelings of varying sizes via strands of green. Somehow, just like with the walls, it clicks to her that whoever made this did so of their own volition.

This queen wasn't feared or simply respected. She was *loved*.

"I want something like this..." she mutters and pushes the gate open.

Twenty-or-so changelings are scattered dead on the floor, and the memory supplies their identities as the majority of ranks 1 through 30, warriors and infiltrators alike. In their midst stands a broad, towering, muscular, typical warrior changeling queen nearly twice Chrysalis' size covered in scars,

brown mohawk and a short duster tail being her only major distinctions. In the claws of her foreleg she's holding the torn-off head of presumably the previous queen.

"This is what cowards and idiots get!" Carapace snarls, drops the head, and crushes it under her massive hoof.

Chrysalis suddenly feels a presence probing her head, one which certainly can't belong to the warrior nor to whomever has managed to successfully strike terror into her heart last time. It simply *feels* different, non-invasive, yet impressive in its skill.

Once Chrysalis blinks, things get put together in her mind completely without her input.

"You challenged your mother to battle for control of the hive," says Chrysalis, earning a haughty stare from Carapace, "But the corpses here aren't *her* defenders, they're the traitors who ambushed her. She was forced to kill her top ranks all while fighting you," a sadistic smirk grows on Chrysalis' muzzle, "*You* are the weakling here."

"Shadow was *pathetic*," growls Carapace in response, "Peace-loving, groveling, pony plot kisser. This," she points to her surroundings, "was her legacy. A tiny hive underground in the middle of a pony city. She even let our prey in here! For *sightseeing*!" she laughs, "In the end, though, I turned her weakness into my strength. Ponies thought we were harmless thanks to her leadership, so they never expected anything until I made the hive rise up and enslaved the south! We were *feasting*! We were *spreading*! We. Were. POWERFUL!"

"Huh, Bloodlust was right. You really *were* the dumbest of all changeling queens."

"I returned changelings to our previous glory. What did *you* do, you failure of a *drone*?"

Chrysalis narrows her eyes.

“You know what? No matter who is waiting for me deeper in the hive mind, I decided I hate *you* the most.”

Carapace smiles and cracks her neck.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Bark!”

“Woof woof!”

“Roll over!”

Carapace rolls over on her back.

“Beg!”

The flash of a spark of defiance in the warrior queen’s eyes is snuffed out by Chrysalis’ blazing horn, and the ancient queen sits up on her haunches and raises her forelegs.

“Your mother was an infiltrator, and I get the feeling that a pretty powerful one,” says Chrysalis with a disgusted scowl, “The only reason why she didn’t kill you and instead focused on the traitorous filth you persuaded to attack her was because she *loved you!*” Chrysalis clutches her head, “Get out! GET OUT! IT’S ME TALKING, NOT YOU!”

A whisper of a silent apology, more feeling than words, passes through her, and a blanket of calm falls over her.

Sensing Chrysalis’ weakness, Carapace lunges at her, and Chrysalis completely loses control of her body to someone as powerful as she is but with a moment of surprise.

No... to someone completely out of her league.

Her foreleg bursts into green flames, and *digs*. It's not a punch, it's an instinct she never knew she had, and her body adapts its molecular structure perfectly to match the material she's touching in real time. The powerful, love-fueled armor of warrior queen Carapace provides roughly as much protection as a raincloud, and Chrysalis' hoof simply leaves half of Carapace's head missing as her corpse lands on the floor again.

Chrysalis' mouth, without any input from her, says:

"My apologies. That was *personal*."

With that, Chrysalis regains control of her body, the strange, adaptive instinct fading into the back of her mind and beyond her conscious reach, much to her regret. Such incredibly useful ability locked away just beyond her reach.

Infuriating.

After taking a deep breath to calm down, Chrysalis looks around.

"What now? I don't feel like I got anything out of this."

"Oh, really?"

Chrysalis only jumps away and her pulse quickens as Carapace slowly stands up and grins at her, her head hollowed-up where Chrysalis' hoof passed dripping blood and brain matter down her neck.

"How about we try something else, *Chrysalis*?" she says.

There's no burst of green fire accompanying the dead queen's transformation, only a simple green sheen crossing her carapace as if someone moved a lamp over a porcelain doll.

Chrysalis grits her teeth.

Green eyes, a copy of her own, are staring directly into hers, but they belong to a different changeling, a much younger one although still almost as tall as her and just as broad - a female warrior. The warrior shakes her

head to get the wine-red mane styled into an undercut out of her eyes, and the corner of her mouth curls up.

“Better?”

“I don’t know whether to feel furious that you’re using my daughter’s visage or insulted that you’d think it would make me hesitate before blasting your head off,” growls Chrysalis.

“Alright,” the warrior grows a spike out of her foreleg and rams it through her neck before collapsing on the floor, her forelegs reaching towards Chrysalis, “Help... me...” she gurgles as light slowly leaves her eyes, accompanied by coughing out blood, “Mo... ther...”

I WILL KILL HER! WHOEVER SHE IS, I WILL KILL HER! KILL KILL KILL KILL!

Chrysalis is gasping for breath, teeth bared, after barely stopping herself from rushing forward on pure instinct.

The body twitches.

Right now, Chrysalis would do *anything* to get out the hive mind but for some reason she can’t wake up.

Another transformative green glimmer passes through her daughter’s body, and this time the figure of an infiltrator queen rises up. Silver eyes glowing with power make Chrysalis feel small, and even here inside memories, the other queen made sure that both her long white mane and tail are sleek and without any hint of imperfections.

“We finally meet face to face,” she says.

“Which one of the cavalcade of royal rejects are you?” snarls Chrysalis.

“All bark, no bite,” the queen smirks.

Haze of red descends over Chrysalis’ vision.

“I WILL SHOW YOU BITE!”

The white queen smiles as Chrysalis charges at her, spitting acid and roaring.

“Too easy.”

Chrysalis grows a blade from her hoof to slash the white queen’s throat, the attack getting avoided by a simple quick step backwards. Punch after punch led by infiltrator accuracy and coordination gets dodged only with the smallest effort as the white queen starts moving aside seemingly even before Chrysalis attacks.

Chrysalis’ love reserves flare up as her uncontrollable blood rage reaches its peak...

...and everything fades, leaving her blinking, shaking, exhausted, but in control of herself, if not her love reserves.

“W- What?” she stutters, stumbling backwards on legs that barely have enough strength to support her.

As the white queen looks around with a sudden irritated frown, burning chains burst out of the ground and twist around her hooves, neck, and barrel. To Chrysalis’ surprise, the queen only rolls her eyes, seemingly having expected this to happen, and she smiles at Chrysalis.

“We will meet again soon.”

The chains pull at once, and the hive mind reality shatters.

Chrysalis finds herself floating low over a village. Ponies and changelings are going about their day, keeping distance and occasionally giving each other suspicious looks, but there doesn't seem to be any open hostility anywhere.

“Ask any questions you have about the brief period of our history when my daughter ruled us. I won’t hold you here long because you need rest after... all that. ”

“Queen Shadow, Carapace’s mother, I presume?” asks Chrysalis, looking around for the source of the comment.

“Indeed,” agrees the calm voice.

“What was the ability you used through me to destroy Carapace’s shade?”

“That wasn’t me, that was my mother. She also stopped you from burning through all your love.”

“Thank you for reminding me why I want all of you crazy hags gone instead of organizing a time sharing scheme for my head.”

Shadow laughs without a hint of malice, only with genuine amusement.

“I wish I could rest as well and, hopefully, I will soon. However, there is a process to this... process. Back to your questions.”

Chrysalis looks down at the village.

“Why am I looking at another peaceful period? From meeting Carapace’s daughter, I assumed I’d be watching changelings wading through the blood of their enemies and hearing the lamentation of their mares.”

“This is how *I* left things. We were weak because I was trying to present us not as predators. This forced me to hibernate the majority of the changeling hive due to our lack of love. After all, ponies were warily accepting us at best. Carapace used up all our reserve love to force a full-scale takeover of every territory where changelings were present. Ponies got cocooned, villages and cities taken over as breeding grounds over several days. If it failed we would have nothing to fall back on. She flipped a coin and won, ruining everything I worked for in one go. If I were one to hold a grudge I’d be pretty peeved.”

“This happened multiple times afterwards as well...” comments Chrysalis, “The rage consumed queens and made us do really dumb things.”

“I know. This time, though, it was just Carapace acting on her own.”

“I guess even scheming evil is no match for sheer stupidity.”

“You’re still talking about my daughter.”

“No offence, but your daughter was a moron and the world is better off without her. Judging by our current conversation, she must have taken after her father more than after you.”

“I would argue that her... approach was more a product of circumstances rather than genetics. As I said, I can understand her seeing us as weak and declining. Unfortunately, she didn’t have the patience to follow my path.”

“What did she do after she ‘won’? During her daughter’s time, changelings were hiding among the pony population again.”

“She invaded the Griffon Empire... and Equestria... and Zebrica... and the Dragon Lands... and the undead... at the same time,” Shadow sighs.

“Her daughter said exactly the same thing...” Chrysalis facehoofs.

“That, pretty much, is Carapace’s legacy. A larva, blinded by glory of the past which never really existed, lashing out against a perceived insult that never happened.”

“And she ruined everything for us changelings for centuries. Still, didn’t Scream have a hoof in it? So far she seemed to during most of our misfortune.”

“No. My daughter was *unique* in that respect. She managed to do the most damage to us completely on her own,” says Shadow, her voice suddenly old and tired, “Anyway, I suggest that you rest now, Chrysalis. We’ll talk again soon.”

“Why can’t we-”

The memory fades, and Chrysalis wakes up on the cart.

“_

bootingmeoutofmyownheadfrickingoldassholebastardqueenseveniftheymay
bemeanwell...”

“Your Majesty?” asks 68, glancing over her shoulder.

“The more holes-damned queens I meet the more I’m considering
democracy!”

Author's Notes:

Chapter marked as Chrysalis, readership drops to half. Quickly, inject
30 CCs of 65536.

Anyway, not much history this time, because the cycle has been
repeating over and over and over and everyone including Chrysalis
now knows it.

No Scream torturing Celestia either, so she must have had a vacation
or something. Being all evil and vindictive takes it out of an alicorn.

65536: 16

The Nightguard barracks is dark, the heavy curtains draped over all the windows are letting in exactly zero moonlight from the outside. Nopony is on guard today, as Night Hunter and Steel Glimmer are asleep after spending the recent days working on their assignment from Sharp Biscuit regarding the recent assassination attempt, and the reversed day-night cycle has been taking its toll on them. As far as 65536 knows, Pink Sunset and Gloom are on duty, and Sharp Biscuit is... somewhere. As Gloom told the drone before “The Commander moves in mysterious ways”, which was weird to 65536 who thought Sharp’s walking wasn’t strange at all.

Speaking of the drone, it’s nowhere to be found, although clues to its whereabouts could be the faint light coming from under the door leading to the showers and the faint, repetitive grinding noise accompanying it.

All in all, things are peaceful and quiet.

That is, until an ethereal tear made of such pure blackness that it contrasts even with the darkness of the room opens in the air.

A slender leg, charred and caked with blood, reaches out of it, followed by a tall and terrifying, equine figure. Parts of its muzzle are a simple bone cleaned of all flesh, one wing is stripped as well, leaving behind only its skeletal frame, and chunks of its horn are missing.

The creature looks around, its mouth opening to scream but no sound other than a quiet gurgle comes out.

That’s enough, though, and in the next moment, Night Hunter is on all fours with a knife in his mouth while Steel Glimmer has her emergency combat horseshoe on.

The blade clicks and slides out of it.

It's been several days since the Summer Sun Celebration, and life for 65536 has returned to what the drone would call the new normal. The new normal that lacks digging but also lacks the danger of being crunched in too many horrible ways to describe so the drone accepted the state as 'you win some, you lose some'.

Right now, 65536 is in the showers polishing the armors of the two Nightguards snoring in the barracks. Why in the showers? Two simple reasons. One - it didn't want to wake them up. Two - the cleaning solution makes bubbles and bubbles are only shiny under a light. Now, polishing is no digging, but its hooves quickly adapting to get rid of the grime even without the cleaning solution feels close enough. Plus, the armors are big but not particularly heavy for a drone, so 65536 couldn't be happier at the moment. In short, since the Celebration, 65536 found itself an occasional job that combines carrying, digging... kind of, *and bubbles!* Yes, it bears repeating. Plus, it's repaying the Nightguards for how nice they are to it.

Sudden commotion and stomping of hooves from the common room make it look up from the several piles of metal, trot over to the door, crack it open, and-

I WAS WRONG! I COULD BE SUPER MEGA HAPPIER!

Night Hunter gets teleported into the corner of the room, stumbles, but recovers quickly just to charge at the monster. His advance gets blocked by Steel Glimmer getting teleported right in front of him. He reacts quickly enough, vaults over her, and-

-finds himself in the corner again.

The shower door slams open, and a buzzing blur blasts out of the lit room, calling:

“LUUUUUUUUNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AA!”

Contrary to the two Nightguards, 65536 does *not* get teleported away and clamps its forelegs around the “intruder” who, if it’s actually a pony, should by all means be dead.

“The fluffy eared ponies took me to a celebration and there were ponies everywhere and-”

Night Hunter points twice at the door. Glimmer nods, darts past 65536, unimpeded this time, turns on the lights, and gasps. Night Hunter grits his teeth as he finally takes in the details, namely the occasional patches of dark blue hair on the otherwise flayed and burned body and one tiny, quivering, still working pupil.

“P-Princess...?” he breathes out.

“_ and I got to pet woolly fluffers and thumpers and meow hisses and cat birds and I ate ALL THE CANDY-”

Wait, I thought we bat ponies had fantastic night vision, yet 65536 recognized her INSTANTLY.

“Stop staring!” Glimmer barks, her voice shaking, “Push the beds together!”

Stumbling over his own legs, Night Hunter pushes the nearest three beds together so that someone alicorn-sized can fit. When he looks around after a few seconds of doing so, there’s much more of Luna’s blue coat back, and the princess is regenerating right in front of his eyes.

Could it have something to do with 65536 slobbering all over her neck?

“Here, Your Highness,” Hunter points at the beds.

Luna limps towards him, step by exhausted step, until she keels over onto the not exactly soft mattress...

...and 65536 who hasn’t stopped talking for *a second*.

“_

and I totally forgot but I want to show you Blue but I left her in the shower can I go together?”

With one simple flash of Luna’s reconstituting horn, 65536 finds itself lying not only under her but also a plush toy of Celestia.

“Nonono I didn’t mean Not-Blue I meant Blue that’s like you but smaller-”

Flash!

“-yeah that’s her isn’t she super pretty like you but tiny?”

Luna doesn’t reply on account of falling asleep.

65536 slept better than possibly ever before.

It’s not that drones usually sleep poorly at any point of their lives anyway due to having time to sleep only when it’s either that or collapse from working. However, the combination of its muzzle buried in the coat rapidly regrowing on Luna’s neck and being buried under two plushies, one so filled with love that a drone could probably live off of it for years, simply worked wonders in creating the perfect environment.

Still, nothing lasts forever, and 65536 wakes up with the knowledge that it’s time to get to work. What the work would be today is yet to be determined but there’s no more point in going back to sleep. All in all, 65536 is refreshed, filled with love, and ready to start a new day.

Or, as its internal clock tells the drone, a new early evening. Once again, time of the day isn’t particularly a concept for drones - there’s worky time and there’s sleepy time, and sleepy time is now over.

Step one - wiggle out of Luna’s embrace without waking her up.

One, two, three - aaaand switch!

With Luna now tightly gripping Blue instead of 65536, the drone inches itself under the blanket towards the nearest edge. Soon, black, teal-eyed head peeks out from under the covers and, with a final push, drops on the floor.

Did I wake anyone up? No? Good.

A quick check of itself and its surroundings reveals blood and other stains on its carapace including Luna's drool all over its head. As for the Nightguards, Night Hunter and Steel Glimmer are gone, Gloom is sleeping in her bed, and Pink Sunset is hanging by his tail and the fetlocks of his hind legs from the rafters.

Alrighty, shower time! That should be a new time but really it's just a part of worky time.

For a changeling, smells and mess of this kind aren't a bother but ponies don't seem to like those and ponies know all kinds of things so it can't be healthy. Plus, 65536 needs exactly zero reasons to persuade it to go take a shower. It has warm water, it has cold water, it has bubbles, it has soap...

Gloom said not to eat it but, on the other hole, she liked 65536 burping bubbles afterwards so that subject is still awaiting the final decision. Luna should get to judge too.

Half an hour later, 65536 walks out of the shower, pristine albeit still unsure what to do next. Drawing something sounds like a grand idea, or possibly improving its Nightguard armor which, with the amount of added goop from 65536's saliva is slowly gaining actual protective properties.

Oh! Silly me, Gloom and Pink will need their armors cleaned.

With the course of action set, 65536 tip-hooves into the common room and heads towards Gloom's bed when-

****Crackabooooooooom!****

“Eep?!” 65536 clamps its forelegs over its mouth in the middle of its spooked jump caused by the rumbling of thunder from the outside despite it being heavily muffled by both spells and the architecture of the Nightguard barracks.

Whowhawazzwhichwherewhat?!

65536’s head spins from side to side as the drone looks around whether either its reaction or the strange, loud noise itself woke someone up. Thankfully, that doesn’t seem to be the case, so 65536 does its best to slow down its breathing, and eventually its ears twitch as there seems to be some commotion outside. Not just outside the barracks but outside the castle entirely.

Taking care to make as little noise as possible, 65536 sneaks towards the door leading to the balcony where Glimmer sometimes put burning sticks into her mouth that made her puff out smoke. 65536 was unfamiliar with the process but she always tried to blow the smoke into funny shapes for the drone.

The door opens, momentarily letting in much louder noises of someone arguing before 65536 shuts it as quickly as it can and the sounds from the courtyard way below get drowned out by loud screeching. Curiosity completely winning over caution, 65536 hops onto the balcony railing and looks down.

Princess Celestia is there, looking in utter puzzlement at a black pony swinging their head around. Their head is on fire and it’s screeching. Several ponies are scattered nearby, one facehoofing, and the entire courtyard is *packed* with Royal Guards as well as several paladins.

65536 shimmies a little backwards.

Royal Guards are not supposed to see me. Princess Sunbutt and everyone else said so.

The screeching stops, 65536’s jaw drops, and its eyes open wide. Without the ring of fire enveloping the equine figure and now being completely

centered on the top of their head, 65536 can recognize that it's a-

That's not a pony! THAT'S A HIGH RANK! And she has a fire floaty on her head!

The changeling is blankly staring at Princess Celestia as the pony next to her is waving his forelegs in attempts to convey something 65536 can't hear from so high up. The living fire floaty spreads its wings, jumps into the air, and after a quick circle around lands on Celestia's back.

New objectives received:

1 - see the changeling to feed her.

2 - ask princess Sunbutt about the fire floaty.

Huh... usually, when I did that back home, these pointy things appeared on the hive mind map and I just went where they told me.

"...oh no...!" 65536 finally realizes something critical and rushes back into the barracks, right towards Luna, and starts shaking her, "LunaLunaLunaLunaLuna!"

"Nnngh?!"

"There's a changeling outside and she was on fire but she's a high rank and princess Sunbutt is there and they'll leather-"

"Whuh?" Luna gives it a bleary look, "Wanna plushie... or something...?" she groans.

"There. Is a. Changeling. Outside. Surrounded. By. Guards!" 65536 slows down, following each word by pointing at the balcony, "Big. High rank!"

"Hrrgh!" Luna grunts, pushing herself up and quickly limping after 65536 leading her outside where she looks down, grits her teeth, and hisses at the drone, "Thanks!"

With a flash of her completely reconstituted horn, she vanishes and, in a moment, 65536 can see her striding from the castle entrance towards the spectacle.

Short exchange of words between her, Celestia, the changeling, and the surrounding group later, the princesses lead the group into the castle where 65536 loses sight of them.

What was that all about?

Back inside, 65536 simply plops its plot on the floor and waits.

And waits.

And waits...

Perhaps the high rank was scary. Oh no! Is Luna in danger? Do I wake Gloom or Pinky up? What if Luna isn't in danger? They all get super grumpy when they don't get enough sleep.

65536 straightens up as an idea crosses its mind before rushing to the corner where it's storing all its drawing supplies and the faux Nightguard armor. A few moments later, the armor is on, straps are tightened, and a helmeted head peeks out of the barracks door. 65536 has no idea what's on the top two floors of the castle but during its few trips outside it saw only a few Royal Guards in comparison to the bottom floor where they were usually patrolling all the time.

Ears? Got nothing.

Time to scuttle.

Someone as used to the incredibly complex network of tunnels under the hive can never get lost in the simple layout of Canterlot castle, especially when their target is one floor down. Not even three minutes later, 65536 pulls on the handle of a door atop which hangs a simple silver plaque reading 'Sharp Biscuit'.

"What's- *are you crazy?*" Sharp suffers a minor heart-attack as he jumps from behind his desk and the words turn into a shocked choking, "Luna will hang me by my balls from the tallest tower if she finds out you snuck out on your own!"

“Luna went outside when a changeling arrived. A *high rank!*” 65536 gives Sharp a pleading look, “A really scary one, I could feel it from all the way up on our balcony! Everyone was there, even Princess Sunbutt, a ton of guards, *everyone!* We gotta make sure Luna is okay!”

“Elaborate.”

“Uhh, Luna said she had E laboratory somewhere in the castle! What do you want there?” 65536 tilts its head.

“Nevermind. Tell me what happened in the courtyard,” Sharp corrects himself.

After an exceedingly brief explanation of what 65536 saw, Sharp rubs his chin.

“Hmmm... this might actually be good for you.”

“How come?”

“If everypony, and especially the Royal Guards in general, saw Princess Celestia publicly accept a changeling into the castle, even if only for questioning, without setting them on fire it might put a stop to them thinking they have her silent approval in regards to their way of ‘solving’ the survivor situation.”

65536 doesn’t say anything but keeps fidgeting until Sharp sighs and asks:

“And you are *sure* Luna might be in trouble? I don’t want to barge in on another simple changeling assessment. It’s Blazing’s job to be there.”

“I’m *not* sure but we gotta go!” 65536 scrunches its nose, hopping up and down, “High ranks aren’t nice and this one was super high! Like top top top!”

“Fine. It can’t hurt to look. Hop on.”

Sharp's authority gets him and 65536 hiding under a cardboard box on his back through the groups of Royal Guards chatting about the recent occurrence as well as a Nightguard and a paladin duo now guarding the entrance to the dungeons.

After a quick knock, Blazing lets them into the interrogation room. The usual squad is there in addition to a stallion sitting next to the changeling being interrogated and Bright Star, the paladin who accompanied Grandmaster Beacon when they rescued them from Tankard's tavern.

"Is anything wrong?" asks Luna.

"You tell me. 65536 was worried out of its mind," says Sharp, which is followed by the upturned box on his back dropping down and revealing the drone riding on him.

Everyone looks at 65536 who starts nervously kneading Sharp's back with its forelegs.

"I... umm... you weren't coming back... and... umm... she's a *really* high rank... and I got scared... umm... that something bad happened..."

"Yeees, I am incredibly spooooky and if I don't start getting more respect from everyone I'll mind control all of you with my hypnotic gaze," says the changeling mare sarcastically, "No, wait! I'll *roll my eyes meaningfully* at you."

"SHE CAN DO THAT!" 65536 nods vigorously, pointing at her with a shaking hoof, completely ignoring the mare's milky white eyes and the fact that whenever anyone speaks she looks only vaguely in their direction.

"Ahem," Luna clears her throat, "I think there is a question we might have all missed so far. What is- was your rank, Miss Fury?"

"I'm afraid to answer just in case that idiot's head blows up when it hears it," the changeling mare in question nods in 65536's vague direction, making the drone hide behind Sharp's neck.

“Miss Fury, refrain from calling 65536 names,” says Luna coldly.

“When you decide to give it one, I’ll be sure to refrain from using it,” Fury shrugs. The stallion accompanying her slams his face against the table, “Oh don’t be such a drama queen, Crest. We’d need at least three more players to get two balanced drone ball teams.”

“*Meanie!*” 65536 puffs out its cheeks, glaring daggers at Fury.

“Mini what? Mini changeling? Yeah, that’s you.”

“Pfpfpblblblb!” 65536 sticks its tongue out at her.

“Really mature,” comments Fury.

“You’re not one to talk...” Crest moans in despair.

“Oh my gooosh, he’s *right!*” Fury swings her foreleg sideways to pat Crest’s head and misses, “Motherfu-mmhp,” he catches her as she slips off of the chair, “Your Princessness! I’m nine years old. This pony right here is a filly-fiddler! Loligagger... I mean, he’d need *a lot* more to make me gag, but the spirit is there. OFF WITH THIS FILTHY CRIMINAL’S HEAD!”

“Why do I put up with this...?” sighs Crest.

“This booty right here!” Fury grins, “See the chair I’m sitting on? That could have been you if only you got better grades at school.”

“I’m so confused...” mumbles 65536, “He seems to like her but she’s a high rank and she keeps saying mean things.”

Crest smiles at the drone.

“She doesn’t mean it... sometimes,” he says, “She’s just a bit sharp.”

“A bit? Damn, I need to step up my act,” Fury crosses her forelegs on her chest.

A devious smirk grows on Sharp Biscuit's face, he turns his head and whispers something to 65536's ear.

"Ooooh, that makes *perfect* sense!" the drone jumps from him onto the table and then into Fury's lap before giving her a tight hug.

"Ow! Stop that! I'll eat you!" protests Fury despite not daring to physically stop 65536 in current company.

"Nu-uh!" replies 65536, "I'm gonna give you love and then you won't be hungry and grumpy! I don't have much but I can get more later. Or we can get you a plushie like mine! Do you want a-"

"Help, Crest! I'm being unconditionally loved! It burns, IT BUUUUURNS!"

"Now who's a drama queen," Crest pats 65536's head, "Keep going, little guy. I think it's working."

"Aaaaaaaaah-"

"Miss Fury," Luna raises her voice.

"-yeah?" she cuts her act as if nothing happened.

"Your presence here might be a blessing in disguise, as shocking as it would seem. Thanks to your detailed recount of events in Riverside, I don't doubt my sister will be much better prepared for what a task force sent there might discover."

"They won't find anything. Or maybe unconscious villagers depending on how many Chrysalis' stooges dragged off," Fury shakes her head, "We know how to clean up after ourselves. "

"Leave that to us," Luna nods to Bright Star, "Relay the summary of Miss Fury's witness to my sister, and accompany the task force she sends as a... an observer enlightened in regards to the nature of changelings."

"I will have to clear it with the Grandmaster," says Bright Star.

“Please, do,” Luna nods. Bright Star leaves immediately, “As for your situation, Miss Fury, I believe that general knowledge about you might be a shield for little 65536 here. I will arrange for Common Crest and you a guest suite in the castle, and you will be allowed to walk around the entire castle proper. With company, of course. Wandering around on your own would be too dangerous for more reasons than just your sight issues.”

“I’m a changeling. I may be blind but I could *sense* that everyone we passed on our way here would like to see me impaled on a spike.”

“Your Highness,” Crest bows his head curtly, “May I request that 65536 can accompany her in my stead when I’m busy?”

“Yaaaay!” 65536 only hugs her tighter, “Love will un-high-rank you!”

Fury stops struggling against 65536 and just sighs.

“What? Why?! Is it because of all the nasty things I said?”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Crest nods with complete honesty.

“Fuuuuck...” groans Fury.

“What’s that mean?” asks 65536.

“I don’t need eyes to *feel* everyone glaring at me,” says Fury.

“Yes, so choose your next words with caution,” says Luna.

However, something as simple as concentrated hatred doesn’t faze Fury at all.

“A method of extracting lust, sometimes even love. Right, Crest?” Fury smirks.

“Oooh, like Tenny’s brothel place. Gotcha,” 65536 nods knowingly.

“However-” Fury opens her mouth again, much to the horror of Crest who knows *precisely* where that’s going, “if you want to know more details,

Crest and I can demonstrate right here on the tabl-”

Psst!

Fury freezes as a spray of water from a spritzer held by Crest hits her face mid-word.

“It’s a trick I learned over the past few days. It works *shockingly* well,” says Crest simply.

“I WILL BITE YOUR COCK OFF!” Fury bares her fangs at him.

65536 gasps.

“Don’t do that, cocks are big and warm but they don’t taste good.”

The temperature in the room plummets *instantly*, lights flicker, and everyone can hear Luna’s neck creak as she slowly turns her head almost hundred-and-eighty degrees from Fury towards Sharp. Then Luna starts counting:

“Ten... nine... eight... ”

Faced with imminent annihilation of his body and possibly even his soul, Sharp’s brain works overtime to decipher what 65536 was talking about:

“We took 65536 out during Summer Sun Celebration and we visited a petting zoo. 65536 tried to nibble on most of the animals... and visitors.”

Luna breathes out, lights stop flickering, and the area stops requiring the attention of an exorcist. There’s only one thing that can make everything go wrong again and she’s currently sitting next to Crest and holding in laughter.

“Oh my holes, I just know I’m gonna love it here!”

Luna looks at Common Crest with a suddenly sadistic smile.

“Mister Crest, I advise you fill that bottle with tabasco sauce. It could be a learning experience. For all of us.”

“No offence, Your Highness, but with how often I have to use it she’d be *living* in the shower.”

65536 gasps:

“That must be amazing! All the bubbles you want whenever you want.”

At this point, everypony twitches with nervous anticipation whenever Fury opens her mouth, but there’s an unspoken agreement that they’ll never admit it in front of her.

“If you’re so interested in bubbles, drone, do you want me to tell you what angry dragon i-” she suddenly finds her head inside a magical bubble which isn’t letting any sound out.

“*Fury*, there are things I will *not* tolerate. Count what you just said as strike one. You get to three, you won’t see the punishment coming. Got it?” growls Luna. Stoically, Fury stares her way for far longer than the rapidly diminishing air in the bubble should allow. After a seriously unfair staring contest, Luna simply makes the bubble vanish, adding “So?”

“Huh? I was waiting for someone to start laughing at that ‘see it coming’ line while counting how long it would take you to realize I can grow air holes anywhere on my body.”

Crest sprays her again.

“STOP THAT!”

He looks at 65536 .

“Is it a changeling thing?”

“Dunno, try me,” replies the drone happily. Crest sprays its face, “Eeeee! Again! Again!”

Author's Notes:

Oookay, so that happened.

Now, I don't intend to have Crest, Fury, and the Riverside guard group have any role here. This was basically just to solidify where things stand as far as the overarching timeline goes. Plus, I thought 65536 meeting her might be funny. If anyone is interested in Half-Hearted Fury, go read "Hard to Find The Right Words". Her story basically sets into motion certain events which shed some light on the harsh reactions to Boss' group in "An Exercise In Management".

And finally - yes, late update. The periodic depressive burnout has been creeping on for the past two weeks so I think I'm going to need a break soon. It's fine, though. There's a ton to read here in the Tesla Disney Lucasarts Narratorverse, plus G5 is coming to Netflix tomorrow and that's bound to sprout 756519846549684684 (precise number) fics within a few days.

1313: 7

Thump *Thump* *Thump* *Thump*

To say that a certain striped member of the Blueblood estate has been having a rough morning would be a drastic understatement. However, being fully aware that it was simply a price to pay for the last night which, the zebra has to admit as she's waking up with a throbbing headache, was something she would remember for years to come. Well, parts of it.

Thump *Thump* *Thump* *Thump*

“Ughh...” Zamira opens her eyes as the slow tremors of something that may as well be an earthquake in her current state keep going. Luckily, the room is mostly dark so not all her senses are assaulted by the equivalent of an invading army stomping over a wooden bridge. On top of that, her nose catches the alluring scent of coffee and other smells which in her hung over state do wonders for her tolerance of the thumping.

Thump *Thump* *Thump* *Thump*

With a grunt, she pushes herself into a sitting position, only to see the dim silhouette of 1313 pacing back and forth. However, instead of chewing him up, she glances at the bedside table currently occupied by a tray with a large cup of coffee and a plate filled with a mix of sweets, vegetables, a pitcher of water, and a hayburger with fries.

“How did you know...?” she groans.

1313 stops.

“The breakfast? Sugar helps metabolize alcohol, fiber helps hold everything inside you, the water is obvious, I think, and I asked one of your zebra bodyguard mates and she told me you enjoyed junk food after a binge,” he says in a quiet, considerate voice, “The rest I learned from the staff.”

As Zamira takes a swig of water, the black hole of last night releases a certain memory.

“Did we really...?”

“Yes.”

“In Blueblood’s bed...?”

“Yes.”

“And in the shower?”

“Yes.”

“And on his desk?”

“Yes.”

“...and in the dining room downstairs?”

“That was just a light dinner when we came back.”

“Oh thank- wait... did I really ask Zaida to join?”

“Yes, and you started kissing her in front of me.”

“Buck...”

“You’d have gotten to that, likely. I gave her a paid day off.”

“Can you even do that?”

“She didn’t ask. We won’t tell.”

Zamira chuckles quietly.

“Heh. You wanna team up after all this is over and replace Blueblood entirely? I doubt anypony would miss him. Hay, you already made his

parents happier, that paladin fanatic seemed to like you more the first time he met you, and-

“Celestia wouldn’t be happy,” 1313 says with such finality that it completely kills the idea. Forever.

“Ughh... nopony will ever know why...” Zamira moans before taking a bite of the burger and closing her eyes, “This is heaven...”

Thump *Thump* *Thump* *Thump*

“Why are you up and walking around anyway? If you’re nervous, don’t be. I know what Celestia tasked you with sounds difficult but there’s no reason to fall into pieces this early.”

“I’m just thinking,” 1313 shrugs.

“What about?”

“The changeling drone we stumbled upon yesterday.”

The black hole of the blackest blackout releases another memory, this being a rather confusing one.

“You mean the one wearing Nightguard armor? It wasn’t a costume... or that weird performer’s trick?”

“It wasn’t a disguise, it was a real changeling. It was also the one whom they tried to assassinate, I’m sure of it. It had a scar on its belly but it was otherwise perfectly healthy and full of love. Considering the wound it sustained, without a constant supply of love and a safe place it would be dead.”

“And a bunch of Nightguards taking care of it, am I remembering it right?”

“Exactly. Celestia refused to show me that during her magical reconstruction of the crime but she called the drone Princess Luna’s associate. That means both princesses know about the drone and don’t

consider it an enemy or a prisoner judging by the Nightguards' reactions last night."

"If the princess showed you all that, does she know you're a changeling then?"

"Tough to say..." 1313 sighs, "She *loves* Blueblood, so if she thought I replaced him I doubt she would be kind to me. That points towards her not knowing. On the other hole, if she's fine with a drone running around the castle then she might be suspicious that not everything is as it seems even if she suspects I *am* a changeling. Either way, we have to start looking for the attacker, but now we have one more clue to follow. I've been pondering *how* to follow the said clue since I can't shapeshift."

Zamira, having absolutely *annihilated* her breakfast, lies down on her back again.

"Just give me a few hours and I'll be good as new."

"If you describe that Raven pony whom Princess Celestia mentioned, I might not need you today."

"Raven Inkwell. Earth pony mare. Grey coat, black mane, big glasses. Princess Celestia's personal assistant. I'm pretty sure everypony in the castle knows her," Zamira groans.

"Thanks. Have a good rest."

"I'll be fine. How about you go grab an aspirin from a pharmacy and we'll visit the castle afterwards, okay?"

"Don't worry, just sleep."

"G'night, buggo."

"Night, stripey."

1313 sits down into the armchair in the corner of the room, listening to Zamira's breathing. As soon as it slows down enough to indicate deep

sleep, he walks over to the bed and gives her a kiss laced with a small dose of changeling venom. Without fangs, it's not as if he can use it to manipulate an unwilling target, but it's still a useful tool. After all, what kind of an infiltrator would he be if he transformed *completely* into a pony, even under duress?

That should help you rest up properly.

With that, 1313 leaves the room and, shortly after, the mansion as well.

The numerous groups of ponies responsible for cleaning Canterlot after last night paid no mind to 1313 as he walked to the castle, and neither did he spot anyone following him this time. Other than them, the city looked lifeless, streets barely even hosting guard patrols. Apparently, the day after the Summer Sun Celebration was some kind of general holiday, which suited 1313 just fine.

The castle staff wasn't so lucky, although it did look as if only a few servants were present, and 1313 had his doubts if Raven would be around despite hearing her to be quite the workaholic. However, asking a random Royal Guard proved that to be the case, as he pointed 1313 in the direction of a small office on the castle's bottom floor where a pony fitting Raven's description called him inside after knocking.

"Prince Blueblood, how may I help you?" she asks with only the barest hint of irritation which wouldn't be noticeable to anyone without infiltrator experience.

That stone face is impeccable.

"Miss Raven, P- my aunt sent me to ask you about the recent assassination attempt in the dungeons," explains 1313, hoping that while being polite could make anyone who knows Blueblood suspicious, it might also make Raven more willing to talk about details rather than simply spilling facts, "If I recall correctly, my aunt was supposed to have a meeting that late in the evening, right? Was that unusual?"

Raven stands there for a short moment, silent and blinking several times in surprise.

Oh damn, she KNOWS Blueblood much better than I thought and right now I'm acting so out of character that-

“Unusual, yes,” Raven gathers herself and interrupts his train of thought, “Unique, no. My job is to relay requests to the Princess no matter the time, and I am no stranger to waking Her Highness up in the middle of the night. What was strange about that particular meeting was that the request came earlier the same day. Usually, when I am rescheduling meetings, they have been set a long time in advance when circumstances may have been different.”

Whoever planned this had money, influence, access to the castle, inside informant, and fewer brain cells than a Badlands scorpion. All signs point to nobility, certainly.

“Who was the meeting with? Who arranged it?”

“It was a sealed Council of nobles request without any particular member signing it delivered via a courier,” as 1313 opens his mouth, Raven keeps going, “And before you ask, that is not a rare thing either. It was simply a request for Her Highness to arrange a free slot in her tight schedule.”

The problem here is - how would anyone know ahead of time that Celestia would have a meeting with a changeling drone in the dungeons at that precise time, in that exact cell? That DEFINITELY doesn't seem like something she would tell anyone about.

“Are you familiar with the target of the assassination attempt?”

“The only thing I know is that it was Princess Luna's companion residing inside the castle at the time,” Raven shakes her head.

The timing is absolute nonsense. Even if I assume someone knew about the drone beforehoof, they could never know about the meeting unless Celestia confided in someone who talked.

Still, why would CELESTIA plan on meeting the drone at the same time she was supposed to meet with a council member? Even with a packed schedule, I doubt she would simply forget. Unless...

“Do you keep the schedules written somewhere? If so, may I see the record for the specific day?”

“Of course,” Raven nods, walks over to the filing cabinets at the back of her office, and quickly pulls out several sheets of paper stapled together, “However, I must ask you to keep anything you read in there a secret - Princess’ orders.”

1313 nods, takes the offered records, and starts flipping through the papers. Over and over, back and forth, revisiting the records repeatedly for no reason apparent to Raven. In the meantime, he asks:

“This might be only tangentially related, but how is the state of anti-changeling alarms within the castle?”

“Hmm?” Raven tilts her head before reminding herself that Princess Celestia herself told her to assist Blueblood with his inquiries, “I’m afraid that as an earth pony I cannot really say, Your Highness. However, in addition to emergency experimental paladin alarms added directly after the invasion, we already had an expert from the United Orders of Wizardry set something up last week.”

An expert on changelings? I suppose someone dissected enough corpses off of the streets to cook something up.

“Thank you, I feel much safer here already,” says 1313 politely, knowing he’s straining his Blueblood disguise but it seems to be working on Raven, “And you said you often fill these slots in my aunt’s schedule weeks earlier, right?” he waves the presented schedule. When Raven nods, he continues, “And you write them directly into these pre-printed records.”

“I do,” without being asked, Raven reaches into a different cabinet and pulls out an identical set of stapled papers, presenting it to 1313, “This record is for next Thursday. Most of the slots are filled in already.”

1313 skims it and returns it to Raven.

“Thank you,” 1313 mentally chides himself again when Raven visibly leans back as he thanks her. He walks closer and offers her a hoof to shake, “My aunt got lucky to snatch such a skilled secretar-” he sneezes directly at Raven, “Oh I’m so sorry!” he ‘accidentally’ pushes her forelegs down when she tries to wipe her face off, “I don’t know what happened-”

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” Raven finally pushes him away, “This place is a bit dusty from all the parchment,” the forced smile she gives him as she takes off her glasses to clean them looks somewhat dizzy all of a sudden.

While she grabs a paper cloth from a pack on her desk and starts cleaning her glasses, 1313 grabs another one and gives it a quick lick while Raven isn’t looking, then he offers it to her to clean her face.

Several moments later, the droplets of his sneezed-out venom coupled with the remains on the wipe do their job, and as Raven puts her glasses on she remains standing there, watching him with and swaying slightly.

“I almost forgot,” 1313 rubs his chin, “When did you say the courier delivered the Council request?”

“Earlier that d- wait, no,” Raven pauses, scrunching her nose, “No. Several days earlier, definitely, but for the life of me I cannot recall when exactly. My apologies. I am sure that if you gave me some time I would remember.”

“Don’t worry about it,” 1313 smiles at her and follows it with a courteous bow, “Have a pleasant day, Miss Raven.”

“You too, prince,” Raven stumbles back behind her desk.

“And when I’m gone, write this meeting into *your* schedule, make it take a whole hour. No, hour and a half. Then take a nap for the rest of our session. You deserve a rest. Those bags under your eyes can’t be healthy.”

“That sounds... like a good idea,” Raven grabs a notepad from her desk and starts scribbling into it while 1313 pauses.

“One final question, if you will. Are there Nightguards present in the castle?”

“Hmm?” Raven’s eyes are already closing on their own, “Try Sharp Biscuit’s office on the third floor or the barracks on the fourth.”

“Thank you and-” 1313 smiles as Raven’s head drops on the desk, “Nevermind.”

Leaving her office, he heads upstairs through the castle.

Someone messed with her memory and either forgot to anchor the timing properly or was in a hurry. The ink wasn’t scraped off enough in contrast to the other entries. Celestia didn’t know about the meeting beforehand because there wasn’t one. Someone entered the castle, saw Celestia and the drone... somehow, and sought out Raven on the spot.

It wasn’t a changeling. She doesn’t- well, didn’t smell of venom before and the attack happened recently. If someone messed up memory manipulation this badly, they would have to be a worse infiltrator than I am, much worse. That means they would leave a lasting trace of venom no doubt.

So... magic. Probably. Was the unicorn attacker in the castle already and did they simply monitor the alarms? But if the alarms work, how was I not caught? Maybe they’re not that good, maybe- wait, the drone wasn’t transformed yesterday. Could it be that it was running around the castle undisguised?

Torchlight knew about the alarms going off before last weekend. Connection? I don’t know enough about pony politics to assess this properly.

Thankfully, today’s minimal staffing and guard presence allow 1313 to take a stroll through the castle to commit the layout to memory just in case. He passes by Sharp Biscuit’s office, quickly pressing his ear to the door and hearing quiet scribbling.

After several minutes on the top floor, 1313 finally finds what he's been looking for. Mentally reaching out for the drone's hive link, he can sense it being numb just like yesterday.

Yep, got the right changeling just behind this door.

[Nightguard barracks]

Probably accompanied by a bunch of armed ponies.

He prods the hive link again. On the second examination, 1313 realizes that, unlike yesterday, the link is reacting, it just feels incredibly busy, as if the drone's mind was completely overloaded with stuff to process.

Examining the doors next to the Nightguard barracks, one proves to be a locked armory and one-

Bingo!

-an unlocked storage room for sheets, pillows, and other common things.

Sitting down by the wall neighboring the barracks, he focuses on the drone's link. He's not good enough of an infiltrator to simply forcibly reset and clear the drone's mind, not that he would particularly want to do so anyway, but given some time he should be able to gradually insert one specific suggestion without harming it.

In the late evening, fully refreshed Zamira greets 1313 as he enters the dining room.

"Where were you all day?"

1313 just smirks, unrolling a sheet of paper on the table.

Zamira gasps.

“That’s our culprit,” 1313 puts his hoof under Zamira’s dropped jaw and closes her mouth.

“The picture is... so lifelike. I’ve never seen anything of this quality. Where did you get it? How?”

Lowering his voice, 1313 explains:

“I managed to insert a suggestion into the mind of the drone we saw last night to write a description of the attacker and to leave it behind a toilet in the servant bathrooms on the top floor. Then I left the castle and took a stroll through Canterlot.”

“What for?”

“It’s a *beautiful* city,” 1313 shrugs, “Before you-know-what, the only towns I saw were holes like Appleloosa or Dodge Junction. In case I blow up after all this I wanted to see a little bit... more.”

Zamira goes silent. Recent events only left 1313’s looming threat of death only as a topic for jokes and this reminded her that, in his mind, it’s always a reality.

“Sorry...” she breathes out.

“Eh, we’ll get catapulted over that bridge when we get there,” 1313 taps his hoof on the table next to the incredibly detailed unicorn portrait done seemingly in pencil and crayon, “This is what the drone left for me there. I guess the guy isn’t much of a writer,” he chuckles, “Anyway, this is our attacker. Unfortunately, magic is involved so even this might be the result of an illusion. The missing hoof, though, fits what Celestia showed me during the reconstruction of the scene.”

1313 explains his suspicion regarding someone altering Raven’s memories and not doing the best job of it.

“This is probably a stupid question but why don’t you just tell Celestia?” asks Zamira.

“How good of a magician is Blueblood?”

“Crap...”

“Yeah, he would never realize that. I can’t come off as *too competent*. That’s a new situation for me.”

“And is this supposed to be a servant or a guard?”

1313 shrugs.

“I suppose...”

“Or maybe a mercenary,” Zamira narrows her eyes and rubs her chin, “From what I heard, the vast majority of Royal Guards resigned shortly after the invasion and they called for reinforcements from other cities who didn’t have the experience with changelings. I wouldn’t be surprised if they hired a merc or two.”

“You’re having an idea, aren’t you?”

“Yep, but we’re going to need gold. A bit more than I can spare.”

“I mean... if you know of anything lying around here I won’t be stopping you.”

“Great!” Zamira beams, “I know several mercenary and guard bars. We go there, buy a few rounds, and show the ponies this,” she taps on the portrait, “Or a photo of this because I don’t want to lose it in a scuffle if it comes to one.”

“What’s the chance of us running into the unicorn?”

“Little to none. The point is that rumors about us looking for him will spread.”

“And if we have this portrait then we can be sure the Nightguards protecting the drone will have one too,” 1313 grins, finally understanding, “We won’t be able to cover the city exits but that way we won’t have to.”

“Yep, we’ll just stake out around Blueblood’s friend Torchlight’s house and see if there are rats trying to flee the sinking ship. Of course, if all this leads nowhere the only thing we lose is a bit of gold,” she pauses, “And by *us* trotting around I mean *myself*. You’re just a little bit too conspicuous.”

“No, I’m covering you in case you meet that unicorn’s friends.”

“1313, you’re beyond useless in a scrap. And again - *huge royal unicorn whom everypony knows*.”

“There are ways to change without shapeshifting. Don’t think we’re not used to working without love. You saw the drone, didn’t you?”

“I don’t think paper streamers will be enough to cover up somepony as noticeable as Blueblood.”

“Know any good dye shops?”

“Sure I do. You don’t think Blueblood didn’t want me to look like the first unicorn trophy marefriend with a proper ass at any point, did you? Though I’d like to avoid the fake horn tiara, that damn thing made my head hurt for a week afterwards.”

“Perfect! And as for combat tricks, you’d be shocked how quickly ponies scam when you start pelting them with your fetlocks from range.”

“Kinda limited on ammo, isn’t it?”


“Four shots are usually enough. If not, you can break your shins in soooo many places. I scared so many drunk farmers off by just saying ‘Look what I will do to you if I can do this to myself’. Crunch.”

“I’m not running through a mercenary bar after a fight with a vacuum cleaner, you dummy. If you lose something you’d better learn to trot with a peg leg!”

“The best pirate costume ever?”

Author's Notes:

I know it's not a 65536 chapter, but not everything can be a 65536 chapter.

Or can it...? :duck:

Anyway, next time - let's look 2 weeks into the future and see how the lumber camp changelings are doing.

1988, 9999: 9

The Equestrian Intelligence Service knew about events in Riverside, or at least suspected something was wrong, long before Half-Hearted Fury arrived in Canterlot accompanied by Riverside police force who escaped from Chrysalis and the gathered changeling survivors. In response to lost periodic contact, Princess Celestia authorized the assignment of a ranger unit to scout out the area and report with their findings. However, with the arrival of Fury and her testimony, the ranger report saying the Riverside changelings were gone, and the potential of the shapeshifters being far from a singular hostile entity, Celestia sent a representative to Riverside, one who wouldn't kill a changeling on sight.

To Bright Star's surprise, the town was slowly recovering from the trauma of being completely taken over by changelings, although the signs of damage were clearly visible despite the organizational efforts of ponies wearing leather armors and dark green cloaks clearly suited for sneaking in the wilderness.

Bright Star's paladin armor gives him enough authority to straight up stop a pegasus ranger barking orders in the town square and ask:

"Who's in charge here, ranger?"

"Who's asking?" the pegasus measures the paladin from head to hooves.

"Bright Star, paladin."

"Then the pony in charge would be me, sir," his tone turns more official as he salutes.

"And you are?"

"Commander Whisper Wind, sir!"

"Got a full situation report somewhere, Commander?"

“I borrowed a room inside the town hall. All the information we’ve gathered so far is there. Testimonies, full damage reports, everything,” Whisper Wind nods sideways to the biggest building in town.

“Let’s go. In the meantime, how’s the town?” asks Bright Star, unceremoniously heading towards the entrance and expecting the ranger to follow him without objections, which Whisper Wind does.

“In short, minimal property damage outside of broken doors and windows, sir. Clearly, the goal of the changelings was to get to ponies, not to go for scorched earth tactic.”

“Speaking of the ponies, how are the locals holding up? The situation in Canterlot is... bleak to say the least.”

“The vast majority are accounted for and recovering. So far, no more victims. It seems that the townsfolk were barely fed upon and mostly had no idea what even happened until they woke up covered in green goo as we cut them out of the cocoons.”

“Not everypony then.”

“No, sir. Details are in the full report.”

“Any changelings?”

“Not a single one, sir. Dead or alive.”

“Tracks?”

“Nothing in the vicinity of Riverside itself, but a wide search revealed what could be tracks to the northwest.”

“But nothing around town...”

“That’s nothing special, sir. Escaping parties often cover their tracks well around the crime scene but let up further away due to time constraints.”

“Any clue it’s the changelings?”

“Judging from the map of regular trade routes, it’s unlikely that it would be anypony else.”

“Have you sent anyone to follow the trail?”

“Yes, sir. A group of six rangers.”

“Can you spare a ranger to lead me to them?”

“Yes, sir. Our investigation here is pretty much finished. We’re waiting for a report from the scouts before returning to Canterlot.”

“Hmmm...” Bright Star rubs his short beard, “In that case, how about we go join the scouts?”

“Sir?”

“Commander, the changeling situation is a little different than we thought. As it turns out, instead of a frenzied army we saw them as, it might be more akin to civilians being forcefully drafted and used as a front line by elites in charge. Princess Celestia sent me here to see if there are any potential non-hostiles left. If so...” Bright Star pauses.

“We negotiate, sir?”

“No. Do you rangers still use hoof-mounted crossbows?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Commander, changelings are still a hostile faction, especially in groups, and they caused horrific damage to the lives of ponies. We’re not risking anypony trying to negotiate. We shoot first, but in the light of the new circumstances, we aim to wound.”

Two days have passed since the group of changelings taking the cocooned ponies north to presumed safety left the lumber camp, and the remaining lings quickly returned to their routine. Unfortunately, 1988 inspecting

everyone every evening had to note that their overall love level was barely even holding steady and he had no idea why. A casual poke into the minds of the drones revealed nothing suspicious, and a more detailed examination would only exhaust them all even more.

If this keeps going on, it might come to him having to take the more *aggressive* approach in preparation for the cocoon group eventually returning, undoubtedly exhausted to the point of dropping, but there's still enough time for that.

Right now, the best thing he can do is sit down, close his eyes, and focus entirely on maintaining the hive mind knowledge accessible to the drones from as much range as possible.

36658 shares exactly no worries with 1988 as it's walking around the camp before noon. Empty stomach and starvation level of love might be something unusual to infiltrators but for a drone it's the basic level of existence. Normally, it would be helping someone with their job but the logging site the drone was supposed to be in was empty. After waiting for some time and concluding that no one was coming, it returned back to the mostly empty camp.

"You!" a female voice coming from the repurposed shipping container section makes 36658 jump.

"Who you? Me you?" the drone looks around.

"Do you see anypony else around?" replies the medical mare whom 36658 met only once before and who was pretty clear about not being exactly happy about it.

36658 looks again.

"Ummm, you?"

The mare grits her teeth before shaking her head.

“Why would I be- nevermind. You, I need you to come with me,” she beckons 36658 to follow her.

“I’m not sure I should,” 36658 hesitates, “You’re the mean healing lady.”

“My name is Triage and I’m not mean! Generally.”

“I’m 36658 and you were mean to *me*. Specifically.”

“Because you’re a weird, black, insectoid drug dealer.”

“That’s speciesist!”

“The *drug dealer* part was my problem.”

“Hmmm. Makes sense, but still mean.”

“Just come!” she insists.

“Eeeeh... nope? When a high rank tells a drone to follow them without direct orders, it never ends well.”

“What? No, you idiot, I need your *help*. Now!”

36658 narrows its eyes.

“How hungry are you?”

“What? We don’t have time for this nonsense.”

36658 nervously steps backwards.

“I... I think I should go check up on 9999... or... anything else that gets me away from here... aaand from getting eaten.”

“I’m not hungry, I just had breakfast! NOW CAN WE GO?! Please...”

36658 sighs but decides to risk it and follows Triage.

“...leggies, don’t fail me now...”

Several moments later, inside the makeshift infirmary, the problem becomes quite clear.

“That’s a biiiiiig hole,” 36658 winces as it looks at a sedated stallion with a massive gash in his hind leg surrounded by bags of ice, bottles, and tied up in various places, “Oh hey, I think I was supposed to be working with this guy today.”

“Now do you see my problem?”

“I see *his* problem.”

“I’m the doctor. His problem is my problem.”

“I have leg holes too,” 36658 shows Triage that it, indeed, does have leg holes.

“You’re *supposed* to, I think. Ponies aren’t, and that I know.”

“When this happens to us, we kinda just goop it up.”

“I’m not risking sepsis from one of you puking all over him. No, I need painkillers.”

“Agonyslayers.”

“No!”

“Totally yes. And that’s easy!” it shoves its hoof down its throat.

“No, I don’t want your bark puke,” Triage pulls the drone’s hoof out.

“Then it’s not easy. Wait, why did you need *me* then?” 36658 tilts its head, now completely stumped.

“Look. I need to operate, and if I do it under your makeshift version of aspirin or the small amount of morphine I have left there’s too much of a

risk of him moving at the wrong time. If he does so, he's bound to lose the leg."

36658 leans in conspiratorially.

"Don't tell anyone I told you this, but 57999 has a super nice stick stashed in its hiding spot. It can totally work as a leg with some proper glue."

"No, I want him to keep his, which is where you come in."

"I came in through the door."

"That's what *I need you for*. I need better painkillers."

"Agonysl-"

"Shut up!"

"You're mean."

"I'm under stress because a pony is in danger of a crippling injury and my best chance of minimizing risks is spouting nonsense!"

"Ummm, you mean me, right?"

"YES!"

"I, umm, can see a hole in the plan. I can't make anything better. I tried with more zebra bark, some grass, or other combinations, but nothing worked better. I think I got the agonyslayers pretty much perfected."

"Did you try poppies?"

"Last time I was near the latrines, a mare smacked me over the head with a rolled up paper thingy. Called me a peeping tom. I don't even know what that *is*."

"Oh Celestia..." Triage facehoofs, "No, I meant poppy, a red plant."

“No idea what that is either.”

“It’s a base for an exponentially stronger painkiller than aspirin, and your primitive bark p- *agony slayer*-”

“One word- agonyslayer. It rolls off the tongue way better.”

“One more naming-related interruption and I’ll flip a coin and either kill you or myself based on the result.”

“...” 36658 clamps its forelegs over its mouth.

“Good. I have *zero* idea how your internal chemistry works but you’re skipping a lot of steps in the preparation of aspirin, yet the green things you make from bark are close enough. My idea is that if you eat a bunch of poppies, you might make... well, a lot of *illegal* things but I hope it would be some level of opiate. Or you might explode, I don’t know. Look, if it works you’ll save a pony’s leg. If not... we tried our best and I’ll give you... umm, something. Okay?”

“Neat! Do you have any poopies?”

“Poppies. Please never say that again.”

“Okay. Got any?”

“No, but I talked with Sawtooth and he said there was a poppy field roughly three hours away from here. I think it belongs to somepony but if you just quickly nab some of the plants you should be in and out before anypony notices. You’re going to need a map and a bag. In the meantime, I should be able to use my magic to keep the leg sterile and stop necrosis from setting in.”

“Can’t you just magic him asleep?”

“Oh, why didn’t I think of that?” Triage rolls her eyes, sarcasm dripping from her words... and completely going down the drain before reaching 36658.

“Wohoo! I’m helpful already!” 36658 punches the air victoriously.

“No, you moron. I can’t keep him asleep, prevent him from thrashing around, holding my equipment, and scanning the wound at the same time. Surgery like this usually takes at least two ponies. Now, *map!*” she glares at the drone who gulps under the mare’s equally desperate and furious stare.

“13415 copied a picture of the world from Sawtooth but I don’t know where its stash is. I don’t have a bag, though. I was explicitly told not to take those without asking.”

“I can get you both but I need you to hurry,” Triage sighs, “I’m serious. He won’t last long like this.”

“Wait! I’ll ask 57999 to help and we can get *two bags!*”

“Good. Go do that then. Let’s meet up at your prayer spot or whatever in two minutes,” she storms off. As instructed, 36658 heads off towards the meeting spot while mentally tapping into the strongest hive link around.

“1988. Calling 1988!”

“What’s wrong, 36658?”

“I need you to connect me to 57999. It’s too far from me. We have to gather popping red peas soon so that a pony doesn’t have to walk with a peg leg or a cupholder.”

“For the love of holes, 36658, if you overdid it with bark again-”

“Nope! It’s a mission from the mean medicine lady.”

“Fine. There, you’re linked up,” replies 1988, and 36658 feels his mental presence being replaced by a much more familiar one.

“57999, you there?”

“Yep. What’s up?” asks the other drone in a chipper tone.

“Meet me at the place I just pinged you on the local map. We’re off to save a pony and maybe make something special, something amazing, something even better than agonylayers - tormentannihilators.”

“Oh. My. Holes.”

To 17070’s surprise, the huge, bubbling cauldron in the middle of the logging camp is unattended.

That can’t be right.

The drone stands up on its hind legs, propping itself on the edge of the cauldron with its forelegs and looking in.

Yep, filled with vegetables. If there’s something I remember, it’s that this needs to be stirred continuously or the... taste will be bad or something.

In absence of anything better to do, 17070 pulls up a chair, sits down on it, grabs the big metal ladle, and starts stirring.

“Heya!” it hears a mental greeting a short while later.

“Hi, 36658! I thought you’d be away with someone,” 17070 greets the other drone approaching it.

36658 shrugs.

“There wasn’t anyone around, so I came back. Whatcha doing?”

“Stirring! Normally, Miss Ladle does that but she isn’t around so I think she had to run off because... reasons.”

“Can I help?”

“I don’t think so,” 17070 shakes its head, “There’s only one ladle and I was told I’m not supposed to add ingredients without supervision due to having weird taste buddies.”

“Alrighty. I’ll go see what the ponies do at this time of day. I hear something from the containers in the back. Maybe they’ll throw out something interesting.”

“I can trade you a cup- helmet thingy. Just don’t walk with it near a fire if you don’t want to end up like me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

36658 chuckles and walks off. As it walks around the central office building, Swirling Ladle rushes out of it, striding quickly towards the stirring 17070.

“Hello!” the drone waves at her when it notices her approaching.

Ladle smiles, pats its head, points at the cauldron, then at the drone, and makes a stirring motion.

“Yes, I was just stirring. I didn’t add anything,” says 17070. In response, Ladle nods and rubs her chin before gesturing towards the table with ingredients.

“You can go prepare stuff, I will keep stirring,” 17070 hazards a guess. A wrong one judging by Ladle’s shake of the head. This time she beckons the drone to follow her.

At the table, she dices a carrot before pushing the cutting board to 17070 and putting the knife in front of it.

“Me?” asks the drone. Ladle nods.

When the carrot is diced into almost perfectly even pieces, Ladle grins and pushes basically a bucket full of various other produce.

“All of that?”

Ladle nods again.

No complaints, nothing. As Ladle goes to stir the usual stew, she can't stop herself from wishing she could take the weird bugpony home.

Roughly an hour later, the huge pile of vegetables is all prepared, but to 17070's surprise, Ladle leaves and returns with a smaller cauldron filled with water. Then she moves the stew one onto a hook further away from the fire pit since the cast iron frame holding it has multiple of those. On the hook directly above, she puts the smaller cauldron. Then she walks over to the table with the assorted vegetables and splits off a small part from each kind. When she's done, she points at each pile from left to right, then at 17070, and finally at the small cauldron.

17070 ponders it for a moment, scoops the leftmost pile onto the cutting board, waits for a nod of approval, and then hauls it over to the secondary cauldron. One nod later, 17070 gets the idea and begins walking back and forth while Ladle points towards the latrines at the far side of the camp and leaves.

The drone finishes its job.

"No ladle to stir this," it mutters.

It grabs the big one from the main cauldron and positions itself over the small one. Manipulating a ladle roughly one third of the size of the cauldron proves tricky, and the drone sticks its tongue out in concentration.

A glob of drool soon hanging from the tip of its tongue drops directly into the mixture.

In front of the drone's eyes, a black rip in space opens.

"Aaah?!" 17070 jumps backwards, its legs tangling up and landing it on its butt.

A dark blue foreleg reaches out, visibly straining against powerful resistance. A second one succeeds in reaching out, and they both pull. A mare's head sporting a mane looking like the night sky follows. Her teal

eyes lock on the drone, and her mouth opens repeatedly. The mare's clearly desperate expression pushes 17070's fear away, and the drone stands up.

"Sorry, stew pony lady. I can't hear you. But hang on, I'll call Miss Ladle!" it runs off towards the latrines.

"Miss Ladle, Miss Ladle! There's a pony in my stew," it bangs on the door. A moment later, Ladle's head peeks out of the door cracked open, looks towards the fire pit, and the mare raises an eyebrow.

17070 looks back and sees nothing out of ordinary.

"She was there! A big, dark blue mare with a horn and wings, teal eyes," it points vigorously before looking at Ladle again and sighing, "Aww... you don't believe me- WAIT! I CAN PROVE IT!" 17070 rushes off.

One mad dash later, 17070 ends up in the changeling clearing, staring directly into 1988's eyes.

"1988, 1988, 1988! Miss Ladle doesn't believe that I saw a pony in my stew. I need you to look into my head and tell her I wasn't lying."

"Is it relevant to our situation in ANY way?" the infiltrator facehoofs.

"Miss Ladle will think I'm a dummy and won't like me!"

"Aaaaand?"

"Less love!"

"Ugh, fine..." he rolls his eyes.

1988 scours the drone's most recent memories which, thankfully, isn't particularly exhausting with it basically shoving those into his face. Then it hits and, even without sound, to an infiltrator Luna's body language is crystal clear - enough desperation to consider a *changeling* her... hope. 1988 sits down, his jaw drops, his eyes go wide, and he whispers:

"...oh holes..."

“Told you so!” 17070 starts nearly vibrating with excitement, clearly stopping itself from running back and forth, “Now will you help me?”

1988 gathers himself from the ground, his mind racing and reaching for any possible explanation about Princess Celestia’s presumed sister calling for help from... wherever.

“...and how in all holes would she reach... this guy?” he shakes his head, following 17070.

As soon as they reach the center of the camp, 17070 starts calling out:

“Miss Ladle! Miss Ladle!”

“Where did you run off- oh, hello. Can I help you?” she tilts her head when she sees 1988 accompanying the drone.

“17070 called me here to vouch that it saw an alicorn in its stew, no matter how insane it sounds,” says 1988.

“Uhhh, okay...”

“It really thought it was important... for some reason,” 1988 keeps explaining flatly.

It was, but definitely for a completely different reason than the drone thinks.

“Aaand you would know that it wasn’t just smoke from the fire or anything?”

“Because, and I know you know this, we can communicate telepathically and we can also, sort of, share minds. I don’t think a pony can completely grasp the details but 17070 wasn’t lying, wasn’t mistaken, and didn’t suffer a temporary bout of insanity. That’s all.”

“There. Message relayed.”

“She doesn’t look satisfied,” mumbles 17070.

“Because she clearly has no idea why this was necessary and, to be honest, neither do I.”

“Miss Ladle, I wanted 1988 to tell you I really *did* see a stew pony so that you didn’t think I was a dummy and stopped liking me...” says 17070 out loud in its unstable tone caused by deafness.

“Awwww,” Ladle scoops the drone into a quick hug before putting it on her back, “That never even crossed my mind.”

“Never even crossed her mind, idiot. The idiot part is from me, not her.”

“Yaaay!” 17070 hugs the back of her neck.

“But since I’m here. Do you have any idea why a pony resembling who I suppose was Princess Luna might appear in your... stew, or soup?” he glances at the two cauldrons.

Ladle bursts into laughter.

“Earth. Pony. Cook,” she shakes her head when she calms down and points to her forehead, “Kinda missing the pointy bit up here to understand magic. You’re the guys who can make explosives from your puke.”

“Huh...” that gives 1988 a pause.

“And, I mean, you don’t have cutie marks but I sure as hay know that zebras can basically cook magic so who’s to say that this little critter didn’t stumble upon something special?”

“Huuuuuh...”

“Blew your mind, didn’t I, Miss?”

“Not. A. Mare!”

“Shoot! Anyway, you might still look good with a bit of silver eyeliner and lipstick. You know, a nice mix of black and white.”

1988's eye twitches.

"I will think about it. In the meantime, adios!" he storms off, grumbling to himself, "First Hacksmith, then this."

Author's Notes:

Sorry for late upload again. I'm having trouble finding time to write right now but I'm trying to get into it.

Anyway, more drones mucking around, pretty much.

I hope the quick once-over was enough to get rid of typos and stuff.

1988, 9999: 10

Luckily for the duo of bark-eating drones, the trip to the poppy field was uneventful and the copy of Sawtooth's map depicted landmarks well enough for 36658 and 57999 to not lose their way.

That is, until 57999 scouting ahead finds its progress forcibly stopped.

"Goop! There's a barrier. Soft metal thingy," it bumps into the metal 'thingy' and bounces off, "Tough but springy too. Must be magic!"

"Hmmm," 36658's hoof *digs* through the chain link fence without any resistance, cutting out an uneven hole, "We *gotta* grab this. Do you have any idea what we could trade all this for?"

"No?"

"MANY things."

"Oh my holes! Soo... square metal thingy first, then popsicles?"

"Yup."

With the chain link fence proving no match for the drones' digging instinct, the duo quickly roll up the cut off fence and fasten it to 36658's back with globs of goo.

The main objective comes next, and both drones mix eating the poppies with filling the two bags they got from Sawtooth. The field seems massive and the two bags get filled up soon. However, the duo catch barking from the distance followed by loud rustling quickly approaching them.

The drones clearly overstayed their welcome.

"Bitey woofers! Mozzarella it!" calls out 36658 when it notices a shape rushing through the plants.

“Wooooow! You speak fancy?” asks 57999, dashing by its friend’s side and helping it by supporting the bulk of the bag.

“Mister Hacksmith told me so many things!”

Unfortunately, drones aren’t the best long-distance runners, and the loud noises closing the distance from behind are relentless.

“The woofers are too fast! I think it was their stash,” comments 36658.

“You can’t have a stash that’s not hidden! If it’s not hidden, it’s everyone’s!”

“Maybe they’re just bad at hiding stuff and we found their stash!”

That, indeed, would be breaking the unspoken drone code.

“Huh. Yeah, that would be against the rules. On the other hole, a pony will lose his leg if we give the pops back.”

“Got an idea! Let’s trade,” 36658 nods sideways, “You’ve got a fresh batch in you, right?”

57999 tosses a fresh hoofful of presumed agonyslayers the dogs’ way. Almost without thinking, the dogs lick all the scattered bits stuck to their muzzles without slowing.

At first, that is. A short moment later, the pursuit stops and the dogs drop on the ground.

“Hey, I think it worked!” cheers 36658.

“We should come back with the new tormentannihilators!” 57999 pauses, “Wait, we did! We ate all those poppers. I think they worked really well on the woofers.”

“WHAT THE HAY HAPPENED TO THE DOGS?!” screams a new, furious voice in the distance.

“THEY’RE JUST SLEEPY!” yells 57999 in response.

“ARE YOU THE BASTARD WHO STOLE OUR FENCE?!” the voice continues.

“WHAT’S A FENCE?”

“I WILL FIND YOU AND GUT YOU, WHOEVER YOU ARE!”

“On second thought, we *shouldn’t* come back. Ever,” concludes 36658, “If they have more woofers, they’ll catch up.”

“How about the split tunnel trick? You take the bags and I draw them thataway!” 57999 points in a random direction.

“Great thinking!” 36658 stops in its tracks and 57999 immediately starts looking for a way to load the second bag on 36658’s back. The weight isn’t a problem, rather the size of the cargo. Hopefully, though, 36658 won’t need to run if 57999 does its job well.

“Thanks. Good luck, buddy!” whispers 36658.

57999 nods and darts north. Several moments later, it calls out to draw the pursuers’ attention away from 36658.

“Your plants are pretty! Can I get some more later?”

“YES!” replies the angry voice.

“Wait, really?”

“WITH ARROWS!”

“Hey, I want those- oh wait...”

And the hunt begins anew.

In the changeling camp, 20100 has returned from its job helping ponies early, its return quickly explained by its shaky steps and sickly moaning.

“Ughhh...”

“And what happened to you?” asks 1988, opening his eyes as his meditation, planning, and maintaining the hivemind gets interrupted.

“Too much wood- hurk!” 20100 throws up on the ground, and quickly begins digging a hole next to the mess.

“Oh right, you were trying to make paper. How did that go?”

“Blurrngh!” this time, 20100 hits the fresh hole.

“If it makes you feel any better, you can’t make moving pictures with the water reed papyrus like you tried either.”

“...it doesn’t...” 20100 collapses on its butt.

“So... what went wrong? And don’t mistake my asking for caring, I’m just bored and too starving to maintain the hive mind and try to seduce a pony at the same time.”

“I ate too much... I think.”

“So you just ate a bag of sawdust and hoped for the best?”

“Yes? One sec- bluuurhghg!”

“I see that’s your new puking hole. Right here in the camp,” comments 1988.

“I’ll fill it in afterwards. Don’t worry.”

“Maybe showing a basic level of foresight and finding a place *away* from the center of the camp when you first felt sick would have been better.”

“Hindsight is number-number,” groans 20100.

1988 sighs.

“Let’s get back to the core of the problem - you really just ate sawdust and hoped to throw up paper?”

“It works for 36658 and -hurk!- 57999!”

“Yeah, two drones of the same genetic strain found one another. These days, that’s basically a miracle. Do you even know if your digestion has any special properties?”

“What?”

“Look, you drones don’t have enough self-control and knowledge to make your digestion work the way you want. Holes, even I can do only basic manipulations with my resin and venom.”

“Then why do their tummies do exactly what they want?” pouts 20100.

“They got *lucky* that their interest aligns with their ability. That’s all. Or they simply discovered what their biology was good for and stuck to it.”

20100’s ears droop and its face turns into a picture of pure misery. At least until its eyes bulge and it throws up again.

“But I like moving pictures...” the drone mumbles afterwards, “So does everyone else.”

“Really? It isn’t just a passing fancy until you find something shiny?” asks 1988 skeptically.

“Nu-uh! Oops, exactly the wrong noise to make right n- blurghh!” 20100 resumes filling its hole.

“Then, just a passing thought because I doubt you drones are capable of learning anything this complex, how about you try making paper *the right way*? I mean, like the ponies do.”

“I dunno how the ponies do it. I asked Magic Lantern and he had no idea.”

“Well,” 1988 scratches his head, “You know I was stationed in Appleloosa, Dodge Junction, and the other backwater holes in the south including Klugetown, right?”

“Uhh, no?”

1988 facehoofs.

“Nevermind. Since those places are too far from the heavily industrialized north to import everything, they use simpler crafting methods for local products including paper. It’s not the smooth, white paper like the notepad the foal showed you. It’s yellow-ish, doesn’t last as long, cracks at the edges, and is more used as toilet paper than for books, but it could work.”

“I’m listening! Hurk! Wait no, I’m- bluuurghh!” 20100 experimentally prods its belly, “I think that might be everything. Now I’m listening.”

“And as things would have it, I know how to make it.”

“Yay! Woohoo!”

“Given the right tools, obviously, and in a factory.”

“Much less woohoo but still a little bit yay,” 20100 remains positive. Something as simple as ‘a thing being impossible’ has no chance of dampening a drone’s day.

“It’s going to take some time and doubtlessly a lot of failures because it’s a multi-step process. Do you have any sawdust left?” asks 1988.

20100 looks at the hole filled with... mess.

“That?”

“YOU ARE NOT EATING THAT AGAIN!”

“Okay. Then I’ve got a bag over there,” the drone nods towards an uprooted tree in the back.

“Bring that here and don’t eat anything yet.”

The drone does so and sits down next to the bag, eagerly awaiting next instruction.

“Oookay,” 1988 digs in his memory, “The first part is simple - get rid of the useless part of the wood. You’ll need to adjust your stomach acid to be a little stronger and not add any resin to the remains. Grab a hoofful and try it.”

20100 carefully chows down the sawdust and swallows. After a moment of thought, it burps out a cloud of smoke and pokes its belly.

“I think it was too strong.”

“And what do we do when we fail?” 1988 gives encouragement a shot despite being fairly certain the drone has no chance of succeeding.

“We wibble?”

“No, we try again and adjust the variables. In this case - the stomach acid.”

20100 gives it a second shot.

And a third.

And a fourth.

On the fifth try, it throws up some kind of brown-ish yellow mess and proceeds to prod it.

“What’s that?” it asks 1988.

“It *might* be somewhere in the neighborhood of what you need. What you want now is to find a flat rock, roughly this big,” 1988 spreads his forelegs to indicate the dimensions, “It can be smaller if we don’t want to make standardized A5-A4 sheets-” he stops himself when the drone tilts its head, “Just find a roughly flat rock that’s at least three by three hooves in size.”

To his mild surprise, 20100 sits there for a while, rubbing its chin, before bolting away and returning shortly after, carrying a boulder of about half its own size on its back.

“Here,” it drops it directly in front of 1988.

“And the flat part? You didn’t forget the flat part, right? Because there isn’t any flat part here,” 1988 taps on the rock.

“Nope!” 20100 beams, its hoof glows, and it *digs*. Its forelegs shear the rock as if molding soft clay, leaving behind an almost perfectly smooth surface in the matter of minutes, “Ta daa!”

“How in all holes...?” 1988 taps into 20100 to measure how much love that stupid drone burned to make this and, to both his horror and amazement, discovers that it was basically none. If *he* tried that in his current state, he would be an empty husk. Holes, he might not even know *how* to do that.

“We’re made for digging,” 20100 shrugs.

“I guess so,” 1988 admits, “I’ve never even seen a warrior use a transformation like that and that would completely revolutionize changeling combat. Can you do that again while I’m tapped into you?”

“But the rock is smooth already.”

“Polish the side or something.”

“Okay.”

1988 enters 20100’s mind. A drone should be easy to read, and it is. That is, until 20100 begins the digging process. The infiltrator lasts for barely a minute before a headache forces him to withdraw and he has to admit defeat. What the drone is doing isn’t conscious. It simply wants to dig and its biology does... weird things. Maybe if he had enough love and time, he might be able to decipher the process but right now he’s smart enough to know he’s standing in front of a steep mountain without climbing gear, magic, or wings.

By the time 1988 recovers, 20100 has polished the rock into a cube, infuriating the infiltrator by spending much less love than him simply observing the process.

“Alright, that’s enough,” 1988 shakes his head, “You’re clearly made for this and I don’t have the resources to copy the process.”

“Yup, digging, carrying, and being delicious. That’s us!”

“Being delicious?”

“Why else would everything back home want to eat us?”

With a sigh, 1988 can’t stop himself from patting the drone’s head.

“Back to the topic of making paper. Make more of that weird stuff you threw up last time, enough to cover this rock with a thin foil.”

Attempt after attempt, the day goes by. Failure after failure, the drone keeps obeying the infiltrator without questioning. Eat wood, throw up weird brown stuff, spread on rock, let it dry, it cracks and breaks, 1988 thinks about an improvement. Over and over and over.

And yet, for no identifiable reason, neither of the two considers this a wasted day.

17070 returns to the changeling camp by the evening, spots 1988 busy with 20100, decides not to bother them, and walks to the back with the one remaining Silent guarding hibernating 9999. The Silent watches as 17070 sits down by 9999 and boops it.

17070 smiles at the Silent.

“High Score is doing fine and no bits are missing. You’re doing a great job, buddy.”

The Silent simply tilts its head.

“Don’t worry about not being the smartest or understanding things. It’s not like most of us drones have any idea what’s going on. But hey, ponies don’t throw stuff at us, no one is trying to eat us, and Miss Ladle gives the best hugs. Wanna see?”

The Silent stares, clearly not grasping the concept.

“Like this!” 17070 walks over to the Silent and gives it a hug. The other changeling simply stands there, “You’re supposed to return it.”

It raises its forelegs and wraps them around 17070.

“Yay,” chirps the drone happily, “Now do you know who deserves hugs the most?” it wiggles out of the hug and points at 9999, “That guy! I would explain why but you probably wouldn’t get most of the words. High Score is just so awesome that normal drone words can’t even describe it. You’d need warrior words or maybe even infiltrator ones!”

Another head tilt.

“But you know what never fails? Hugs.”

With that, 17070 lies down next to 9999 and wraps its legs around it. Several moments later, grass cracks under the Silent’s hoofsteps as it lies down as well and simply throws one foreleg around the two.

“Nice first try, buddy,” mumbles 17070, “You’ll get there eventually.”

1988’s attempts with 20100 failed to produce anything resembling paper but they were slowly getting better. If changelings ever bothered to use wooden pulp tablets for writing, there was one drone who could easily supply them. However, the constant failures eventually evoked the “I know I’m too stupid to understand all you’re saying but please don’t be mad” phase in 20100 so 1988 decided to call it a day. The thing was that 1988 wasn’t particularly invested in the process, so the one who got gradually more and more mad at 20100 was the drone itself.

After that, 1988 decided to wander through the pony camp to absorb some ambient affection as the ponies returned back after a hard day's work. However, with them being visibly busy, he couldn't do much more than eventually return back to the changeling campsite.

He enters the camp at the same time as 57999, but before he can take stock of what the drones, who are now chilling out in a circle, did throughout the day, he notices something big that wasn't there before.

"You didn't get eaten, that's so *awesome!*" 36658 charges straight at 57999 entering the camp, and tackles it to the ground.

"Woop woop!" 57999 nuzzles the drone atop it.

"WHERE IN ALL HOLES DID YOU STEAL THIRTY PONY LENGTHS OF A CHAIN LINK FENCE?!" screams 1988 after examining the rolled up object 36658 tried to unsuccessfully hide in its stash between the roots of the uprooted tree.

"So thaaat's what the voice was angry about," 36658 and 57999 exchange knowing glances.

"That's not an answer!" 1988 stomps over to the duo and, in all his slender height, *looms* over them.

"We had to get poppers to save a pony's leg," explains 36658.

"I wasn't asking about the poppies, Triage stopped me when I was walking around. Congratulations, by the way, there's a big chance the pony will walk again on all fours-"

"IT'S A SMALL STEP FOR A PONY, BUT A HUGE SUCCESS FOR THE DRONE KIND!" 36658 and 57999 exchange a high one.

"Don't celebrate yet, I can still do unspeakable things to you if you stole the fencing from the camp."

"We didn't steal it!" 36658 corrects itself, "Uhh, I mean from the ponies," it corrects itself again, "Uhh, the camp ponies, I mean. This was between us

and the poppies so we had to clear the way.”

“THIRTY. PONY. LENGTHS!” 1988’s eye twitches.

“It looked useful and was super easy to roll up,” 57999 beams at 1988.

“GRRRAWRHGLBLGLGLL!” the infiltrator’s eyes bulge as an incoherent scream of frustration leaves his throat.

Nervously but in perfect sync, both drones lean backwards.

“Do you want a tormentannihilator?” asks 36658, “They’re *super* calming. Medical lady spent a long time poking her patient in an open wound and he didn’t say a thing. And poking around under our carapace *really* hurts, we know that. We even gave a small tablet to 20100 earlier since it felt super sick. And we tried them too just for effect. Makes things totally painless. I smacked 57999 with a stick. All properly tested!”

“Torment- poppies-” 1988 suffers a minor aneurysm as he finally connects everything and realizes why all the drones around are barely reacting to his possibly unjustified anger, “ARE YOU ALL BUCKED UP ON SOME PRIMITIVE VARIANT OF HEROIN?!”

“Yeah! Medical lady totally called us heroic!” 57999 nods with enthusiasm.

“AAHHHHHHHHHHHH HH-?!” 1988 stops screaming as he reflexively gulps when something lands in his open mouth, “You *didn’t* just throw a heroin, morphine, or any other derived opiate in tablet form into my mouth. Because if you did, I’d have to peel off your carapace and-”

“Nope!” 36658 shakes its head, beaming, “It was just a tormentannihilator, no heroics or morfeus.”

1988 facehoofs, but the sudden rush of peace stops his desire to crack the drone in half like a wishbone in its tracks almost instantly.

“And it works on changelings...” he mutters, facehoofing, “Because of course it does. You tested it...”

“Well duh.” 36658 shrugs, “Wouldn’t be much use otherwise.”

“Holes damn it!” 1988 shakes his head and unsteadily walks away.

36658 and 57999 exchange worried looks.

“Did we do... bad?” asks 57999, its ears drooping.

36658 pats its head with a forced smile.

“Hey, we saved a pony from leg pegging, and if we’re about to get nommed, it was all my idea anyway because Miss Triage asked me to help.”

“I dun want you to get nommed!”

Sad wibble!

“It’ll be fine,” 36658 closes its eyes in its moment of zen, “You know all the healy goop tricks like I do. You can do what I can do. If anything happens, just help medicine up everyone who needs it... even high ranks.”

“CHEER UP PILE-ON!” yells 20100 out of nowhere, immediately pouncing on 36658.

57999 joins in. 17070 doesn’t hear the call to hugs, but is familiar with the signs, so it lands on the small pile of drones with only a slight delay. Seeing that 36658 isn’t cheering up enough, 57999 frowns.

“This doesn’t have the effect it used to with only four of us here,” it comments and translates the message into a mental version for 17070.

“I know what will make this work!” 17070 sits up, being the king of the pile, “Gimme a sec!”

It trots off.

It trots back with 9999 on its back, followed by the Silent, and throws 9999 into the pile.

“Now you!” it taps on the Silent’s head and points at the pile.

The Silent looks around quizzically, but it seems to get the idea as it slowly walks over to the pile, sits down, and leans its side against the nearest drone.

“DRONE BALL!” 17070 yells in victory, jumping into the pile again while taking care not to land on the now rather fragile 9999.

“What the holes are you doing?” asks 1988, returning with a bug zapper hooked into a leg hole.

“Cheer-up pile for 36658!” replies 20100, “And we threw High Score in so that it didn’t feel left out.”

“Idiots, it doesn’t feel anything right now,” 1988 shakes his head, walks past, and hangs the bug zapper on a low-hanging branch, “Since you two saved a pony’s leg, 17070 actually got us some love, and 20100... probably learned something, you can have your shiny right here and watch from your friendship pile.”

“Nu-uh!” the drones shake their heads as one.

“I’m sorry. What?” 1988 pauses, “Aren’t you, like, hooked on it?”

“Not when it’s off,” says 36658.

“I was just going to turn it on-”

“NO!” the drones say as one again.

“I mean, there’s just a button in the back-” 1988 reaches behind the zapper.

“Only Shiny Bringer brings shiny! We named it like that so that *everyone* would understand. Cheat shiny is goop shiny,” 20100 pouts while all the others nod. Aside from 9999, obviously.

1988 *glares*, and slowly lowers his hoof.

“Weirdos,” he shakes his head and lies down.

The drones exchange glances.

“Cheer up pile?” whispers 17070.

“CHEER UP PILE!” the others yell, and 1988 finds himself buried under a chitinous avalanche. With the tormentannihilators sapping away his desire to do anything, he just sighs again and closes his eyes.

The final thing he feels before drifting off is a faint ‘thud’ from somewhere on the left as the Silent brings 9999 on the pile and plops itself and the majestic Shiny Bringer down as well.

Author's Notes:

I actually managed to do an update in time.

Yes, you did just spend half of the chapter reading the process of making paper. No, I'm not sorry.

Oh well, since it turned out longer than expected, as usual, rangers plot starting the next time this group gets involved.

Come to think of it, there needs to be a "Drone to every home" program, because reasons.

156, 387: 10

As 156 lunges through the portal left standing for a moment after Tantabus' passing through with 387, she lands on a hard surface and immediately rolls to make any counterattack more difficult just as the topmost layer of her carapace turns softer to cushion her impact further and avoid making noise.

Needlessly so, as a cacophony of chaos assaults the infiltrator's ears. A somewhat familiar mix of loud noises, one which even a high rank like her heard only once in her life during the invasion of Canterlot - panicked screaming, pained gasps, stomping of hooves...

...all coming from *below*.

Details regarding her surroundings burst into her head by the beginning of second two as she, crouched and ready to move again, looks around.

She's on some sort of a wide open roof, likely belonging to a military fortress in her experience - it's sloped to avoid enemy physical projectiles piling on it, it's wide open aside from two raised central sections with small turrets likely hosting stairs down and allowing to turn the entire roof into a killzone. However, the changelings with crossbows stationed in each one don't pay any mind to 387 being telekinetically dragged along by the strange lookalike of Princess Celestia. From 387's last words in their safe space, 156 assumes this must be that Tantabus creature responsible for the entire mess they're in, including the dreamscape monsters invading the real world.

Bells start ringing in the distance, making 156 fly upwards to get a better view of the entire situation. Carefully, she also flies closer to 387 and his captor, praying that her attempts at suppressing her physical and mental presence work on Tantabus.

"What an interesting memory," muses Tantabus, looking down at the panic of changelings and ponies running around, knowing they're in danger due

to the warning bells but having no idea what the problem is yet, “Which group was the one you were trying to save?”

387 remains silent.

“Defiance won’t help you. It will only make you suffer for longer,” Tantabus points at a changeling moving more with purpose than panic, knocking at doors, always exchanging a few words, and then darting away again, “Ah, there’s a familiar mind. How many did you try to save?”

“Sixteen,” 387 breathes out.

“How many *did* you save?”

“Eleven,” the warrior turns and stares down Tantabus.

“Are you *sure*?” Tantabus looks at the sky where clouds part, revealing ranks upon ranks of pegasi, all ready with firebombs.

The carpet bombing begins in tune with enormous explosions in the distance where griffon heavy trebuchets start obliterating the edges of the city, launching barrels of explosives enchanted with unicorn magic.

Memory version of 387 looks up before calling out a warning and tackling a duo of changelings by his side to the ground.

However, the changeling on the other side reacts too slowly and gets hit by a shrapnel bomb, its sharpened nails tearing chunks of her body out.

“Wait.. no!” real 387 raises his foreleg, “She lived! She survived! I remember-”

“Did she, really?” Tantabus asks, amused, “Or did you only persuade yourself afterwards that you didn’t fail that badly? I *am* pulling this out of your head, after all. I didn’t even exist in those days.”

“I... I...” 387’s certainty is completely gone.

156, however, being an expert infiltrator, recognizes what's going on. After all, she's messed with the minds of her victims like this so many times.

Oh you gaslighting fuck. You use our heads against us but just making stuff up wouldn't work. You have to use a real memory and tweak it here and there until the target doesn't know what's real. But we're not simply watching what's inside someone's head, we're in a world being shaped by it.

That means...

Two can play that game.

After all, only eleven out of sixteen must survive.

156 lunges down from the roof, lands in an alley next to memory 387, turns herself visible, and runs out, stumbling upon him by "accident" and helping him and the two he saved get up.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, watching the sky for incoming projectiles, "We have to get to safety. Any ideas?!"

387 looks at her, furrows his brows, but after a second he nods.

"Yes, but there are a few friends we have to pick up first. Follow me!"

Under ten minutes later, 156 and the memory of 387 are leading twelve changelings through a tunnel that can barely fit them in a single file, but they are still alive. No one is talking, no one knows what's about to happen, no one knows where 387 is leading them, all they know is that they just survived aerial bombardment, a dragon flyover torching an entire street, and a house collapsing on them as they entered its cellar where the entrance to the escape tunnel was.

Fifteen more minutes later, they're trudging through barrel-high water until they reach a wooden door covered in mud. 387 undoes several latches and the door opens inside on its own, pushed by the weight of water of a small pond surrounded by trees.

Unfortunately for 156, there are still one too many changelings alive.

The price of being just too good.

With only a slight mental push, she stops the heart of the drone she considers the weakest, and it collapses into the water. As 387 immediately dives down to grab it, she uses the splashing to turn invisible and cover her flight up into the canopy of the forest they've entered.

And that makes it eleven.

"Eleven," she hears the real 387's voice, much older and more exhausted, "I knew it was eleven..."

And of course you'd bring 387 here, monster, to see his "failure". Score one for me.

"And that's all you did. Out of the razed cities, tens of thousands killed changelings, you saved *eleven*," sneers Tantabus as 156 silently lands nearby.

"I did everything I could," says 387, "Even this took so much... selection. Queen after queen, they were all the same. I could only get a contact here, say an ambiguous word there, and sometimes a changeling would catch on. Holes, even most of those thought I was trying to bait them into proving their loyalty to the hive. I did everything I could."

"Really? You still call that everything?" Tantabus leans down to 387's face, "With your mental powers, you could have shielded entire clutches from the oversight of the queens and helped them escape. *Generations* of changelings could have lived free if you weren't a pathetic coward!"

"How do *you* know?!" 387 barks back at Tantabus, "You don't know anything about changelings."

"Simple - I'm in your head. Even if I know little about your species, I know it's true because deep down *you* know it's true."

387 only hangs his head and sighs as Tantabus continues:

“And I know you have countless memories of your failures which I will make you relive over and over until you break. After all, I’ve got time.”

387’s horn suddenly flashes, and even 156 winces as the echo of his mental lash against Tantabus washes over her. However, Tantabus only laughs.

“I will enjoy draining that resistance out of you,” it says.

A new portal appears, 156 gets ready to jump once again, and in the next moment they’re all gone.

The second, four-ling, dreamscape group led by warrior 559 and being advised by infiltrator 918 find themselves in a familiar place after jumping through 387’s portal.

“Seriously, the invasion again?” the warrior rolls his eyes as he leads the group away from pony defenders decimating the first waves of changelings raining from the sky.

“First, speak only using hive links. Judging from what 387 said, our experiences are being used against us but Tantabus doesn’t seem to understand the hive mind,” says 918 mentally, “How many of you actually have a more terrifying memory than this? Have any of you ever even left the hive?”

“Point taken!” 559 suddenly bolts into a small alley, kicks open an emergency door to whatever establishment is inside the house, and ushers the other three inside. Next, he jabs his hoof into 918’s chest, “You’re the resident mental landscape expert. 387 said we’re supposed to disrupt the Tantabus’ fake reality. How do we do that?”

“You heard everyone’s stories. Tantabus tried to terrify us before by putting us into a hopeless situation, same with 156 and the drones. Killing us wasn’t the goal. Right now, we’re back where we started - overwhelmed by ponies in an unwinnable situation, running low on love and about to get minced.”

“Wait,” 791 speaks up, “Didn’t 387 say that we basically have unlimited love here?”

In response, 559 smiles and pats the other warrior’s head before saying:

“I’ll just let that sink in just to see if any of you have enough experience to realize what that means.”

“Oh! Ohhhhhhhh...” 791 suddenly grins.

“If we have infinite love, I can guide you through a transformation to shut off your brain’s fear center. That should completely block-”

“Good idea, but no,” 559 shakes his head, *“And here I was thinking you’d be the first one to catch on. One, fear is important. It keeps you alive. Two, if we were completely fearless then Tantabus might catch on and go for the kill instead of scare tactics. And three, the most important of all, we’re changelings.”*

“I almost forgot...” grumbles 918, rolling her eyes.

“Oh shush, infiltrator. What I mean is that I don’t think that anyone ever fought a changeling who had unlimited love. Our in-combat transformations usually barely last a second or two, are targeted to a specific section of our carapace to block a blow we can’t dodge or empower our attack, but never in my life was I in a position to do, well, everything I can do.”

“Oh...” 918 blinks, realizing that 559 is absolutely correct. Other than the top ranks, no changeling ever had enough love to avoid being limited by stamina.

Instead of saying anything, a green burst of fire envelops her body, leaving her carapace hardened, growing sharp chitinous blades on the back of her legs, and sharpening her teeth. The warriors do the same, growing bulkier, toughening up, and even growing secondary armor-like sections of carapace they can easily get rid of if they get damaged.

“Dibs on the first paladin we meet,” 559 cracks his neck, *“I have a score to settle.”*

They charge out of the alley into the main street now swarming with ponies and chunks of destroyed changelings raining from the sky. A Royal Guard can barely turn to face 559 before a punch sends him flying through the ranks, knocking ponies away like a bowling ball, and hitting the wall of the store on the other side of the street clearly only as a corpse.

“Hi,” 559 beams at the shocked ponies, “You’d better call those paladins of yours. I want a *challenge*.”

And the carnage begins. Four warriors and one infiltrator hack a bloody swath through Canterlot, an unstoppable, methodical force meeting hordes of squishy defenders and painting the white city red.

As support, changelings raining from the sky now have safe places to land, and the proper invasion begins.

Slowly, screams of combat orders change into panic as changelings are now swarming the streets, dragging ponies out of houses, and cocooning everyone who can’t run away in time.

And yet, something feels wrong.

“559, take a moment and regroup!” orders 918.

“But we’re winning!”

“Yes, I think that’s the problem!” 918 grabs 559’s shoulder before trying to pull on him with the same effect as attempting to move a continent.

“2899, 791, cover us,” the warrior drags 918 through a kicked-out door of the nearest house before nodding at her, *“You, elaborate.”*

“I need time. This reality feels different from when we appeared here. I- AH HAH! Only an infiltrator would be able to sense-”

“We’re in combat,” 559 slaps her, “Don’t congratulate yourself, just TALK!”

“I can sense the minds of real ponies around. My guess is that there’s night in Canterlot and Tantabus dragged real sleeping ponies into this nightmare of us scouring the city. We’re too strong to be a target right now so it’s using us to break others.”

“So do we just hole up here and ride things out?”

“We could... but if we’re connected to the real world, maybe what we do here can have a positive effect. I mean, we can recognize real changelings from the constructs so we can’t hit the wrong one by accident.”

“You want us to start saving ponies?”

“REAL ponies, yes. The real question is - how’s your unicorn transformation?”

“Ohhh no,” 559 shakes his head, “If we’re doing this, then we’re doing this as ourselves. Let’s make those ponies have some extremely confusing nightmares.”

And so, just like before, a group of 4 changelings charge out of a house.

“WOOOO! LET’S PUNCH CHRYSALIS’ HEAD OFF AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS!” screams 559, punching a changeling warrior’s head clean off, **“Wait, you’re not her. Oh well, NEXT!”**

The final dreamscape portal opens mid-air and lets five drones through. Expectedly, none of them reacts quickly enough and with a series of thuds they all pile up on a wooden floor.

“Where am I?” asks 31214.

“On my head!” reports 19441 dutifully.

“Cool, and me?” 13887 joins in.

“That would be my flank!” 19441 clears up the situation once again.

“Where are we, as in - all of us we?” asks 47989.

“On me...” groans unlucky 10013 who, due to being in charge, ran through the portal first.

With some apologizing, the drones roll away, stand up, and help slightly squashed 10013 back on all fours before looking around.

“Where are we now? You know, now that we’re not on 10013,” asks 47989 again.

“Good question,” mutters 10013.

“Thanks, my head hurts a lot less today,” 47989 nods and winces, “Ouch! Note to self - no shaking.”

They’re in a spacious room with a strangely low ceiling above them. The other half of the room is taken by a set of stairs leading up and splitting into two more staircases lining the walls and heading up to the floor above the drones. Wooden panels are lining the walls, and there’s moonlight coming through the closed windows and glass sections of the main door leading out. None of them have the knowledge to accurately describe the lobby of a big, two-story lodge, which is exactly where they are at the moment.

“Does anyone hear anything?” asks 10013.

“Nope!” is their synchronized answer.

“Do you remember how we got here?”

“Through a swirly!” once again, a clear answer.

“And *why* are we here?” 10013 keeps pressing.

“Uhhh,” all the other drones exchange glances.

“To... keep each other alive?” replies 13887, “Like always.”

“And to have fun,” adds 31214, “Wait, why do I know for sure that our orders were to have fun? Our orders have *never* been to have fun.”

“And to *only* care about ourselves no matter what damage we cause,” 19441 scratches its head, “That’s weirdly specific.”

“I’m not about to start questioning orders from high ranks,” 10013 shrugs, “We’re all *certain* 387 said all that, right?”

More synchronized nodding.

“So... fun then?”

“WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“*Careful* fun!”

“Woo!”

The silent lobby of the lodge turns from a quiet place for contemplation into absolute chaos in a second as each drone charges towards the one thing that grabbed its attention the most inside the lobby.

31214 begins opening drawers of a wardrobe by a wall which, to its mild disappointment, prove mostly empty.

Amids the slamming of drawers, one particular poke into a white ‘thingy’ by the door turns all the lights on in the room. Imitation torches running on electricity spread over the walls cast golden light everywhere, making astonished 47989 call out:

“EEE! THIS BUTTON MAKES SO MANY SHINIES!”

Click!

Lights off.

Click!

Lights on.

Click!

Lights off.

“Keep the shinies on!” yells 10013.

Click!

Lights on.

“All done!” replies 47989.

“Hey, guys, look!” 31214 runs around with a tablecloth thrown over it held by the drone’s stubby horn poking through it, “Imma white like a unicorn-OW!” it trips over the cloth and faceplants into the floor.

BOOM!

Sudden explosion rattles the windows as 13887 flies across the room, yelling from the top of its lungs:

“OH MY HOOOOLES!”

It lands on the floor and rolls until it hits the wall. When it recovers and stands back up, swaying slightly, it points one unsteady hoof at a huge hearth across the room, now lit up and crackling.

“It’s a drone launcher! You turn a turny, it makes a hissy noise, then you push a pushy, and BOOM!”

“I wanna try that!” 19441 is already running over to the hearth.

“Wait!” 31214 strips the tablecloth off of itself, “I’ve got an idea! Turn the launcher off.”

Frantic five minutes go by with the drones grabbing and gathering anything even remotely soft into a pile across the room from the hearth.

In the end, 13887, as the experienced pushy and turny operator, is standing by the hearth while 19441 is facing the hearth, a bunch of pillows tied to its back with ropes.

“Drone ready?” 10013, as the designated leader, goes through the pre-launch checks.

“Ready!” 19441 salutes.

“Turn the turny!” orders 10013.

“Turning the turny!” replies 13887 cheerfully.

“Is it hissing?” asks 10013.

13887 puts its head into the hearth, hears the hissing, and sniffs the air for good measure.

“Hissing and smelling!”

“If anyone has any objections, say them or forever hold your piece.”

“WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT!” 47989 hops up and down, “TOO MANY SHINIES!”

It turns the lights off, leaving the room only barely lit by the bioluminescent teal glow of the changeling eyes.

“Good thinking,” 10013 nods approvingly, “Now, push the pushy!”

“FIRE IN THE HOLE!” yells 13887.

“Which ho-?”

Click.

BOOOOM!

“WHEEE- thud!”

Burning pillows and pieces of cloth scatter everywhere as a plume of blue flames shoots out of the hearth and propels 19441 away.

“Too much fire?” 31214 exchanges glances with 10013.

“Maybe,” the leading drone nods before raising its voice, “Turn on the shinies!”

“Shining the shinies!” salutes 47989, still in the spirit of things.

Click.

Lights on.

“Woooo, that was fun!” announces 19441, swaying, blinking, and dazedly patting down fires all over its body.

“You wanna go for a ride too, 47989?” asks 10013.

“I don’t think my noggin would take it,” the drone shakes its head carefully, “31214?”

“Maybe later,” 31214 shrugs, “Wanna play ‘find the shiny’?”

“Sure,” 10013 shrugs.

“Do we split up to search the place?” asks 47989.

“What? No! Did you hit your head or something?” 10013 frowns at it.

“Umm... yeah?” replies 47989.

“Oh, right,” 10013 facehoofs, “Then no. We stick together for safety no matter what.”

And so, the drones start exploring the upper floor of the lodge and shoving everything they find interesting in pillow cases before gathering those at the top of the stairs.

As they unload their haul and turn around to keep stripping the lodge of everything that's not nailed down, a loud blow makes the main door downstairs crack.

"Did someone turn the drone launcher on?" asks 10013, turning around with a sinking feeling in its stomach.

"Nope, we're all up here," replies 13887 helpfully.

"Yeah, I was worried about that," it rushes into the center of the T-section where the stairs split and looks at the main entrance just as a sharp machete cleaves the lock in two. The others join it with quizzical expressions a breath later, only to see the door being kicked open by a powerful buck of a bulky earth pony wearing a mask covered in holes and with the machete fastened to his foreleg.

The pony looks at them, grunts, and gives the machete an experimental swing.

13887 looks at 10013, and asks:

"Not a ling?"

"Not a ling," 10013 shakes its head.

"Bad guy?"

The pony laughs before 10013 can answer.

"I will paint the walls with your blood!" he points the machete at the group.

"*Definitely* a bad guy," 10013 nods.

"So... we can do whatever we want without getting into trouble?" 31214's eyes light up.

“Yup,” 10013 nods again.

The following moment of silence is only filled with hoofsteps as the pony starts walking across the wooden floor before-

“DIBS ON THE METAL SLASHY!” yells 19441.

“I WANT THE MASK, I WANT THE MASK!” 31214 jumps up and down.

With synchronization that would bring a tear to a warrior’s eye, the drones barrel down the stairs. 10013 draws the pony’s attention by running in first, and quickly jumps backwards as he swings the machete at it.

In the meantime, the others surround him. He swings at 19441 attempting to grab the handle of the machete, and knocks the drone away, only to have to sit down on his haunches to swat away 31214 lunging at its face, yelling:

“Maaaaaaask!”

“HE HAS BOOTIES!” comes from behind the pony a moment before he feels tugging on his hind leg.

It kicks the annoyance away.

“Owww... not in the head...” whimpers a mournful voice.

“THAT. WAS. MEAN!” 19441 points at 47989 stumbling around on three legs while holding its head with a foreleg.

“You will all die here!” the pony raises the machete and snarls at 47989.

The machete drops on the floor along with the pony’s fetlock after being *dug* off by 19441.

“Hah! Got it. Classic misdirection,” 19441 scuttles off with the cut off limb.

As the pony looks in disbelief palpable even through his mask at its missing hoof, he finds himself suddenly missing his hind legs as well. A glance

behind reveals 47989 and 13887 scurrying off with one boot and fetlock each.

47989 sticks its tongue at him while 13887 pouts and yells:

“That’s what you get for kicking 47989!”

“Yeah, that’s what you get for kicking 47989!” 47989 joins in, “Wait, that’s me. Ouch... that kick really hurt.”

“I will-” growls the pony, now on its belly and attempting to drag himself along the floor, seemingly not exactly bothered by three missing fetlocks.

“Yoink!” a weight lands on his back for a moment before two small hooves pull off his mask, revealing a twisted and scarred face. A moment later, 31214 is running around with the mask on, yelling, “Imma scary pony now! Hahahahaaa! Swish! Hack! 19441, lend me that slashy!”

“NEVER! IT’S MINE!”

While the others muck around, 47989 and 13887 trying to persuade each other to trade something interesting so that one would have both boots, and 31214 and 19441 doing the same for the machete and the mask, 10013 watches the now crippled pony crawl around just in case he tries something. A warrior or an infiltrator would finish the pony off, but a drone simply doesn’t have it in itself.

After a short moment, the drone deems the pony harmless and starts dragging the pillow cases downstairs towards the exit. By the time it’s finished, the others have stopped screwing around and gathered around the loot.

“This triple stick made of yellow-soft for... whoa, you have cutters?” 31214 offers a three-pronged candle holder for a bunch of butter knives.

“Yeah, the drawers were full of those,” 13887 digs into his bag of swag, pulling out a bunch of forks, “These stabbers too.”

“Neeeeeat!” 31214 examines its own bag, “What could I trade-”

“DIE!” a furious voice croaks loudly.

“No dice, I didn’t find any,” continues 31214 distractedly.

“I don’t think that guy was giving you bartering ideas,” 10013 hops over the loot stacked like sandbags in the doorway. Everyone else joins it, and in a moment there are only five drone heads peeking out from behind the makeshift barricade as the pony tries to push himself up on his stumps towards the ‘pushy’.

19441 sniffs the air.

“Hey, do you smell the l-”

The pony reaches the ignition button for the hearth.

Everything goes white.

The drones find themselves lying by a lake, dazed and groaning.

10013 sits up first.

“I think the guy was just mad we were hogging the drone launcher...” it mumbles.

“Wha- whuh- whee-?” 47989, bleeding from its nose and ears, keeps muttering confused nonsense before its eyes focus on the burning pyre that used to be the huge lodge.

“I didn’t even manage to yell wheee...” 31214 pushes itself up, pouting.

19441 sits up instantly.

“-launcher fuel. Do you guys smell launch-” it looks at the burning building, “Hah! I knew I smelled launcher fuel. What happened?”

“The pony wanted to use the drone launcher too but overdid it on the smelly fuel, I think,” 10013 replies, blinking and trying to shake off concussion.

13887 rolls over on its belly, the fire of the lodge reflecting in its eyes.

“That’s why we called it ‘drone launcher’, not pony launcher...” it shakes its head, “Should we have labeled it or something?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” 10013 shakes its head, “47989, you okay, buddy? You’re leaking a bit more than is healthy.”

“Imokay...” the drone spits out a wad of goop and shoves it into its nose to stop the bleeding, “All goob.”

“Awww, we lost all the loot,” 13887 looks around at the lakeside covered in chunks of masonry, wood, and random items.

Luckily, the lake seems to be surrounded by many other cabins and lodges from all sides, so there’s hope for more loot once they recover a little.

“You know what?” 10013 suddenly stands up, “We’re all alive and we’ve had fun, just like 387 wanted. I think we deserve a reward. Stay here and keep an eye on 47989 leaking. If it sprouts any more, plug them immediately. 47989, you report any suspected leaks immediately.”

“Bill bo!” 47989 salutes and misses its head, “Oopf.”

10013 smiles and runs off.

The drones keep checking 10013’s hive link just in case it gets into any trouble, but for the next twenty minutes everything feels calm and peaceful, other than more and more crackling of flames bursting out of every single building around.

Eventually, 10013 returns and encircles the area with its hoof.

“The *biggest* shiny we’ve ever seen.”

“Ooooooh!” the drones start clopping their hooves together in realization.

And so, five drones sit by the lakeside with eyes sparkling and the widest smiles possible as the world quite literally burns around them. All’s well

that ends well.

CH: 10/13 - Shadow

Gloom of the late evening has set over the rolling hills and grassland spreading everywhere around the three changelings other than directly ahead. What *does* lie directly ahead in the distance is a twisted, dark treeline managing to look like a wall of danger.

“Huh...” Chrysalis, walking next to the two warriors pulling the battered cart, looks into the distance, “Somehow, this took longer than expected and felt rather quick at the same time.”

The Everfree Forest, a place of danger as well as safety for most changelings, yet a place of memories for Chrysalis.

“We’re almost home...” she breathes out.

“It will still be weeks before we get to the Badlands with this cart, Your Majesty,” reports 68.

“Badlands isn’t my home,” says the queen, “It’s just a place where we can always hide after screwing everything up so badly that there’s nothing else left,” sensing the lack of understanding coming from 68 and 96, she asks, “Have you ever been to the Everfree outpost?”

96 shakes his head.

“The ruins?” 68 raises an eyebrow, “Once or twice. There’s nothing there.”

“The *ruins* used to be the seat of changeling power under my mother’s rule,” explains Chrysalis, “I hatched there, I spent my early years there, and it’s a place I was thinking of the strongest when... when we failed in Canterlot. If there are survivors other than those we left after the whole Riverside incident, their instinct would have guided them there. If any of the top ranks managed to reach the outpost, there are resources there which they can reach to make sure they recover.”

“68?” 96 looks at the other warrior.

“I have no idea,” she shrugs.

“Not you two,” Chrysalis shakes her head, “Only the few I truly trust out of the top thirty would know. Now, before we get there I would like to dive into the hive mind again.”

“Umm...” 96 stops himself.

“Yes?”

“N- Nothing, Your Majesty!”

“Speak,” she simply says. To her surprise, it’s 68 who replies.

“Your Majesty, please, don’t take this the wrong way, but... is that wise?”

“Hmmm?” Chrysalis raises an eyebrow.

“We are about to enter an extremely dangerous territory where the two of us might not be able to fully protect a defenseless target, and we haven’t had much in the way of regaining love recently. Wouldn’t it be better to wait until we get to the outpost?”

Instead of answering, Chrysalis charts several routes on the mental map of the Everfree, transmitting them to both warriors.

“Follow these,” she turns around and walks onto the cart.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the warriors nod.

I need to know as much as I can about what I’m facing before I can let it spread to other changelings.

She closes her eyes and concentrates.

I must be getting better at this.

Chrysalis slips into the hive mind with ease, almost feeling as if she's being invited, which admittedly might exactly be the case. Realizing that, she steels herself, because getting complacent now could be her downfall.

From what I've seen and heard so far, Shadow was one to attempt coexisting with ponies, and queens who tried that were almost pleasant to be around.

However, she doesn't appear in the waiting room, instead being dragged directly into a memory without any input from herself.

It's a deep night, and Chrysalis can hear the crashing of sea waves from directly under her. Behind her, the lights of a fortified coastal town dot the shore.

So far for pleasantries...

"Don't fret, Chrysalis," says a smooth, female voice without a source, "I just didn't want you to waste time and energy pondering what sort of a threat I might pose."

"Queen Shadow?" she asks out loud.

"Indeed."

"Where are you?"

"Where would be the fun in telling you? You have such a high opinion of yourself and simply *finding* me is beyond your abilities? I find it difficult to believe."

Chrysalis growls. Why do all the damn queens must be so INFURIATING?!

A deep breath, that's all she needs.

As she breathes in, a sudden wave breaks on a rock under her, making salty water splatter all over her and swallow it.

“RAAAAAARGH!” Chrysalis fires a blast of energy from her horn down below, making the water sizzle into a puff of steam.

Flying up higher, she notices dark patches showing to her changeling eyes against the sea that are too big to be simple rocks, unless the entire area is incredibly shallow.

“How about you calm down?” Shadow’s voice says exactly the wrong thing to say to someone angry.

“How about you shove a dragon cock in your ass?!”

“Not exactly my kind of tea but to each their own, I suppose,” replies Shadow with a chiming laugh that makes Chrysalis’ eye twitch, “Now watch. This is what Bloodlust used to justify her failed conquests.”

Chrysalis’s horn flares as she mentally reaches out into the darkness, and finally manages to grasp a powerful presence which can’t belong to anyone other than Shadow.

“Get... over... here!” she pulls...

...and fails.

“Please, don’t do that, Chrysalis,” replies Shadow, still out of reach, “You’re better than that... I hope.”

“Grrrrr...”

The shadows in the distance finally get close enough to Chrysalis to see they’re indeed not rocks, rather ships quietly sailing without any light towards the coast. Dozens of ships.

Chrysalis feels herself yanked backwards as memory blurs and time speeds up for a short moment. It’s still night when it stabilizes, but the ships are now lit up, raining fire from catapults and ballistae upon the coastal city.

From the north, the griffon boarding parties are laying siege to the fortifications. It's clear to Chrysalis that the town will fall within hours, if that.

"What a fragile little nation Equestria used to be. A continent with easily accessible natural resources, surrounded by potential enemies on all sides. Undead in the west, minotaurs in the north, dwarves underground, Cloudsdale separationists in the skies above, griffons across the sea to the east, and zebras to the south. Not to mention the dragons aching for an easy snack."

"What's with the undead and dwarves? I never saw any of those, not even during my Empire."

"You weren't supposed to," replies Shadow, building Chrysalis' irritation at the non-answer again, "There are times when leaving those who wish to be alone to their own devices is the right course of action."

"Ughh..." Chrysalis rolls her eyes, "So where are the changelings in all this? In the last memory I visited, changelings were hiding among ponies in the south and were de-facto in control. Or are you going to go full cryptic bullshit until I get bored and decide to burn all my love on dragging you out of wherever you are hiding?"

"Calm. Down."

"Shut! Up!"

A disappointed sigh is all Chrysalis hears as she growls at nothing.

"Just watch the ships."

Chrysalis narrows her eyes and observes the milling aboard griffon ships. In general, it all looks like a war effort, but...

...incompetent?

Almost simultaneously, griffons here and there accidentally spill tar used to light arrows and rocks all over the deck and immediately get to cleaning

after being chewed out by their commanding officer.

As the resistance in the town docks slowly wanes, the sieging ships approach the dock and get closer to each other to drop anchors while their crews take to the sky to assault the town. Clearly the goal isn't to burn the town to the ground or they could simply do it from range.

Out of nowhere, a burning rock cleaves a swath of death in the swarm of the griffons, sending the ranks into panic as they turn around to see why their ship fired their way, only to see a hail of projectiles follow. Dozens get shot down from the sky instantly as screams of panic and orders fill the sky and the griffon force splits. The majority returns to retake the ships, because the ground assault from the north is successful in keeping the pony defenders busy.

As the griffon soldiers land on their ships, Chrysalis can see other griffons jump into the sea, followed by green flashes under the water.

“Changelings?” her eyes bulge, “In the *griffon* army? For the love of all holes, how did you manage to do that? Even I barely snuck a contact here and there due to how paranoid those damn catbirds were during my Empire.”

“It was a generational effort, Chrysalis,” replies Shadow, “Queen Shroud started that, in fact, although she never used it. This is where it paid off the most.”

“How?”

“What you see is only the vanguard of the griffon army. Had this attack succeeded, they would have had a safe landing spot on the east coast away from dragons and far enough north to avoid the zebras.”

“Not bad, but even for a moment of surprise, the losses you just caused were minor at best.”

“No, this is where it *begins*.”

The griffons land, and everything goes white.

When Chrysalis blinks away the afterimages of the sudden blaze caused by a series of explosions, the night is lit like a day by the ships on fire. All but several ships in the back are gone along with the vast majority of the griffon vanguard.

“Oof, that was nasty,” comments Chrysalis, “Still, it was just a vanguard-”

The surviving ships turn towards the ones anchored in the north, and start firing, decimating the ground assault’s camp.

“No, Chrysalis. The same thing is happening right now in the Imperial ports across the sea, all over the west coast, in each of them,” says Shadow, her voice harsh now, “I don’t bark, I don’t lash out. I wait, I prepare, I build up my position, and I strike only when I need to.”

A chill runs down Chrysalis’ spine.

“And have you been preparing to attack *me* this whole time?”

Shadow laughs.

“What an excellent question.”

Chrysalis starts looking around again, reaching out for Shadow and sensing nothing.

“...you are annoying...” she whispers to herself.

A voice by her ear whispers back.

“I *am* a changeling queen. It’s part of the job.”

This time, Chrysalis is ready, and a burning emerald blade made of pure love energy originating from her foreleg cleaves the air before the first sentence is finished.

Empty air.

Crap...

Without her input, the vision fades, leaving Chrysalis standing alone in the hive mind's "waiting room". Concentric silver circles crossed with lines leading into pitch black infinity mark the nonexistent floor. Nothing new.

"Well?" comes from behind Chrysalis without the living queen unable to sense anything or anyone. She turns around, growing chitinous blades on the back of her legs.

There's nothing there.

Immediately, Chrysalis turns around again, her back arched and knees bent, ready to defend herself.

Nothing.

"Have you considered glasses?" asks Shadow once again from behind her with a chuckle.

Chrysalis bares her fangs, turning around again.

Nothing.

"Boo!" Shadow's soft voice comes *directly* from ahead. Chrysalis doesn't turn around again because while she couldn't *see* anything, she felt the breath on her nose as the word was spoken.

Two grey eyes open directly in front of her as if the dark gloom itself came to life, followed by a trademark queen needle-like, *extremely* toothy grin. Chrysalis tries to jump away but the best she can make her body do is twitch as Shadow's control overrides her own.

Continuing her *appearance*, it's not as if Shadow suddenly materializes, it's more as if Chrysalis' eyes finally got adapted to darkness and are able to see shapes that have been there all the time.

“My mother was accurate with names, wasn’t she?” Shadow blows hot air at Chrysalis’ muzzle, who catches herself finally stumbling backwards before lowering herself into a combat stance.

“A slap fest?” Shadow shakes her head with an amused chuckle, “Let’s not go there. I doubt I can offer enough of a spectacle to trump your earlier fights. Especially Mandible was a rather interesting one, and it’s been a pleasure to see you learn in real time.”

“And yet, you took control of my body just now,” Chrysalis narrows her eyes.

“That was just to show you where you stand, Chrysalis. You are powerful, very powerful compared to the prime of *most* queens. Very similar to myself, in fact, even though I lived less than a tenth of your age.”

“How did you do that? I couldn’t even feel you get into my head.”

“However, your ego is your worst enemy. It has been for ages, as much as you’d like to blame the ‘rage’ of the hive mind for making you rush to judgement,” Shadow ignores her and begins pacing back and forth, “If you’re to-”

“HOW DID YOU GET THROUGH ALL MY DEFENSES?!”

The look Shadow gives her conveys only exhaustion and sadness.

“If you don’t keep your cool, Shroud *will* devour you.”

“THEN ANSWER MY-” Chrysalis freezes, “You’ve been *trying* to rile me up all this time, haven’t you?”

“You learn. Slowly but you do. Patience, discipline, and quick thinking, not quick temper are your only shot at finally giving your head the spring cleaning it sorely needs,” Shadow never stops slowly pacing, “As for your original question - how do *you* think I got inside your mental walls? We are pretty much evenly matched in power, far above all the other queens who

ruled between our eras. I doubt you'll have the option to take your time when facing Shroud, so use it now."

Chrysalis closes her eyes, takes a deep breath... and facehoofs.

"You're inside my head already. No... no brain is big and wrinkly enough to hold the sheer amount of knowledge the hive mind contains. You're inside my entire body."

"Bingo!" Shadow pats Chrysalis' head, "The hive mind has an incredible level of ability to maintain and replicate itself. Now, let me give you a final test. If you pass, I will leave without a battle or draining any of your love reserves."

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm not going to like it?"

"You might not, true," the corner of Shadow's mouth curls upwards, "There's an artefact of unknown origin held in a monastery atop the highest peak of the griffon Aeries. The monks guarding it are known to be the masters of mental discipline, untouchable even by the strongest of mind control magics. If you can gain it without shapeshifting, through a contest of willpower designed by the monks-" Shadow bursts into laughter, "You-you should have seen the look on your face! The 'In no holes-damned reality am I travelling across half of the world to some backwater hole and climbing a mountain' expression was priceless!"

"You..."

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Chrysalis sighs and simply waits until Shadow stops laughing. Once the ancient queen finally stops and catches her breath, she asks:

"You're easily amused, aren't you?"

"Oh come on!" Shadow fixes her mane messed up by the uncontrolled laughing, "There isn't much to laugh about these days so I take what I can get."

“I take it that I *don't* have to go on some pointless fetch quest?”

“I mean, fresh air and meditation are both good for you and all, but no. No, my test is a little different - I'm not going to tell you anything about what you're about to face within the hive mind.”

“Risking the future of changelings by not preparing me to face Shroud? That's a pretty bad test.”

“I have good reasons, believe it or not. Now relax and let me take the wheel, Chrysalis. I'm one of your final chances to learn about our history from someone who lived it,” Shadow sits down, closes her eyes, and Chrysalis feels the familiar touch of peace she recalls from her fight against Carapace, “Ask away.”

“Scream,” is all Chrysalis says.

“In my time, she had very little interest in changelings, at least compared to what came later. However, my network of observers all over the world did reveal her involvement in one major event during my rule.”

“So she didn't use you to mess with Celestia in one way or another?”

“There was no leverage she could use against us. I revealed that my changelings had a hoof in stopping the griffon invasion, I revealed the positions of my general population to ponies afterwards, and I sent messengers directly to Celestia regarding our wish to live on the surface. Obviously, I didn't reveal my spies in the high ranks of Equestria or anywhere else, but it was enough for ponies to start getting used to us. Of course, the general changeling population could never sustain its numbers on the scraps of love we were getting, so I had to hibernate most of us until ponies started giving us love willingly. Scream had nothing to use against us and nothing to give us. Unfortunately, my daughter perceived our temporarily reduced state as a sign of weakness, and she wasn't alone. You know what it led to...” Shadow sighs.

“Yes, I do,” growls Chrysalis darkly before lowering her head, “My daughter was a warrior too, you know? Unfortunately... I think it was me who failed her.”

This time she feels Shadow root through her memories but doesn't try to stop her.

“You are the lucky one, Chrysalis,” she says, “You are still in the position to learn from it. I wasn't.”

“Maybe,” Chrysalis shakes her head, “But that's neither here nor there right now. If I don't get my head back then our history will keep going in circles.”

“That's very likely,” Shadow nods, “Now back to Scream. As I said, I had enough of a network of contacts to keep an eye on her involvement. Heroes rose up due to threats to Equestria on all sides, and some even came from distant lands. Of course, we gave things a helping push from time to time. Do you think General Flash Magnus from Cloudsdale would have succeeded in ending Cloudsdale separatism only due to his inspirational nature and a sustained political campaign? Several of his major enemies vanished, some ‘changed their minds’, and with a little push from me here and there, Cloudsdale joined the young nation of Equestria. He was one of the heroes who formed a group ponies would grow to call legendary - The Pillars of Equestria. The next member was a unicorn mare by the name Mistmane who went around the globe and crossed the lands of the undead on hoof. The rest were born in Equestria - Starswirl, Rockhoof, Somnambula, and Meadowbrook.”

“And Scream started messing with them, am I right?”

“Indeed,” Shadow nods, “It all started with a unicorn scholar by the name Stygian who, while no powerful individual, was crucial in organizing the group's efforts and gaining intelligence for them. It was there where Scream wanted us to intervene by seducing him. I agreed but instructed my infiltrator to fail and observe instead. Scream wasn't happy, but with my focus on our growth and our love reserves being used up elsewhere she left me alone. As far as I know, she seduced Stygian herself afterwards with the

taste of lust and promises of knowledge and power. Gradually, he drifted away from the other Pillars, diving deeper into his research, and she used that fact to spark mistrust in the others. When a previously unknown destructive entity appeared, they didn't believe Stygian's information when he told them they needed to act quickly. He sought the help of my infiltrator who was posing as his friend, and she stole some artefacts from the other Pillars which were required to banish the new threat. It was a desperate gambit and, unfortunately, the Pillars united *against* Stygian instead of helping him. The entity possessed divine power unmatched by the Pillars, so they sought the nearest divine help - Scream. The ritual she provided for them made them all vanish, wiping out the most powerful group of Equestria's protectors and leaving Scream the sole victor."

"Were the Pillars personally connected to Celestia somehow?" asks Chrysalis.

"The unicorn wizard, Starswirl, was Celestia's close friend."

"Aaand there it is," Chrysalis nods, "Scream really was behind every major disaster Celestia had faced since forever. Funny thing is that the amount of shit that industrial cake disposal unit had to deal with is only making me gain more and more respect for her."

"It would be nice to know what Celestia did to Scream that sparked such animosity, wouldn't it?" comments Shadow.

"I take it you don't know then?"

"Not the slightest clue," she shakes her head, "Maybe my mother will know something."

"Speaking of her, do you have any tips on dealing with her?"

Shadow bursts into laughter.

"Oh Chrysalis, you can't *deal* with my mother. She will either deem you worthy or she won't."

“Huh?”

“The two of us may be on the same level, but she was the most powerful changeling who ever lived.”

“Hmph!” Chrysalis crosses her forelegs on her chest and huffs, “We’ll see about that.”

“Clear your mind, Chrysalis. Anger, ego, temper... your worst enemies aren’t the queens.”

With those words, Shadow is completely gone, and Chrysalis emerges from her sleep refreshed.

“Holes damn it...” she sits up, “My legs are shaking again.”

“We are with you, Your Majesty,” says 68 out loud.

“No matter what,” adds 96.

Author's Notes:

Marvel act 3 incoming - already rendering the giant, soulless CGI army.

65536: 17

Nearly a week passed since Half-hearted Fury's arrival in Canterlot and Luna's return from the dreamscape. For 65536, it was downright unbelievable because, thanks to it now being general knowledge that there was a friendly changeling inside the castle, *it was allowed to go outside!* Unfortunately, it didn't last. According to Luna, the dreamscape was still in turmoil, so she only took a day of rest which she spent with 65536 before leaving again. No amount of wibbling helped prolong Luna's stay in the real world, but it *did* make her feel better.

So, with the reassurance of quick return, Luna vanished into a portal again.

Unfortunately, so far she hasn't come back.

However, having the entirety of castle grounds as its new playground, 65536 has been keeping itself busy.

"Dig dig dig, only a bit bit bit," mutters the drone as it makes a small hole in a flower bed and plants something Pink Sunset called a geront- gearon-geronimo- a pink flower into it, "Only eight more left, two rows of four. Doo dee do do doo..."

Being able to dig, if only a little bit, and perform a repetitive and basically mindless task has been making 65536's head hurt less and less. Humming with a smile, the drone keeps on replanting the flowers in the shadow of the castle with only a single look up and a quick wave to the pegasus Royal Guard perched on a balcony and clearly keeping an eye on it.

One row of flowers later, 65536 raises its head in surprise as stomping guard hooves that have been passing by the entire morning stop nearby, and it finds itself surrounded by five Royal Guards with *extremely* stern expressions.

"Uhh, hi?"

“Grab it!” orders the leader with a nod.

“Huh? What’s-?” 65536 gets its forelegs swept with a butt of a spear as two other guards make sure it stays on the ground while a third one puts hoofcuffs on its hind and front legs, “What’s going on?” 65536 manages to force out of its mouth with its muzzle pressed into the grass.

“Be quiet or we’ll muzzle you!” barks the leading unicorn as his telekinesis picks 65536 up and the whole unit gets moving.

The only reason why 65536 isn’t panicking is because it can’t move or do anything anyway, which feels eerily familiar to how it was back home when a high rank came to examine its work.

Things get worse when the guards take the stairs down to the dungeons, bringing back its own bad experience.

Things get better when 65536 spots Sharp, who has quite clearly been woken up mere moments ago, as well as Princess Celestia.

Things get worse again when the drone reads the princess’ grim expression.

Things improve yet again when the princess shoots a dirty look to the Royal Guards as she notices 65536 being shackled.

“Take those off,” she frowns. As the guards do so and 65536 finds itself on the floor, raising its legs up and down, her horn lights up and the entrance to the dungeons behind her opens, “Commander Biscuit, 65536, follow me. An EIS expert as well as Grandmaster Beacon are already waiting.”

“Did I do something bad?” 65536 pumps its legs quickly to follow Celestia’s long strides, “I know I wasn’t supposed to dig anything but Pink Sunset told me I could make small holes in the flower bed and move the flowers around.”

“It’s not about the flower bed,” says Celestia grimly.

As they turn the corner and 65536 sees the elderly paladin talking to a pony wearing a white lab coat, the drone’s breathing quickens.

“Did... did something happen to the changelings?”

“We’re not sure,” she shakes her head. Once they approach the open cell door, Beacon measures 65536 with narrowed eyes. Sharp, having the experience, recognizes the coated unicorn as an EIS crime scene analyst.

“What h- ah shit...” even usually calm Sharp grits his teeth, “You didn’t move them all somewhere else, I suppose?”

Celestia shakes her head.

The cell is bereft of all changelings and, unfortunately, contains a young, dead Royal Guard unicorn lying in a pool of coagulated blood on the stone floor, his throat torn open.

“They... did that?” 65536’s jaw drops.

Celestia’s horn lights up. Magic gathers inside the cell and temporarily changes their surroundings, making the body vanish and setting a different scene.

Incorporeal forms of the changelings are lying around, exhausted as always, until the small drain in the corner of the cell lets in several flies. The flies burst into green flames, transforming into a group of changelings. The prisoners raise their heads in surprise and give the newcomers questioning looks. However, they don’t have the energy to do anything else.

The biggest of the new changelings, a warrior mare by the looks of it, uses her saliva to dissolve the edges of the drain cover. A different changeling, almost identical to 65536, walks from prisoner to prisoner, seemingly giving them hugs which make them able to stand up while the big mare ushers them towards the hole. The door suddenly slams open and two guards rush inside. Before they, or even Sharp, Beacon, or the EIS agent can react, the mare is holding one guard by his neck with her mouth, his eyes slowly closing as he sits down and remains staring blankly at the wall even after she lets him go. The second guard finds himself punched by her against the wall, suspiciously near where the dead body is lying now in the real world. Another small changeling, only slightly taller than 65536 but

significantly thinner and overall spindlier, walks over to the guard groaning after a punch that knocked his helmet off, and puts its open mouth around his neck.

One by one, the prisoners shapeshift into larger insects and disappear down the drain but, so far, everyone is alive.

As they're almost done, the dazed guard turns his head and screams for reinforcements, and the spindly changeling bites down. The guard thrashes again, and the changeling gets thrown off, but the damage is already done and made much worse by the guard's movement.

As the changeling stumbles backwards, eyes wide and spitting out blood, the vision ends, leaving behind only the empty cell with one Royal Guard corpse in the position now corresponding with the vision.

"Have you ever considered a side-career at the EIS, Your Highness?" asks the EIS agent, "This kind of reconstructive spell would be invaluable to us."

"It only works here inside the castle," replies Celestia dryly, clearly not seeing any amusement in the situation. Then she looks at 65536, "Do you know who the changeling intruders were?"

"That mare was a top rank," 65536 sits down, staring with tearing-up eyes at the dead guard, "The one hugging everyone was a drone and it was feeding them. The one who... killed the guard was a female infiltrator. I... I think she was younger than I am."

"How could you tell?" asks the EIS agent with genuine curiosity.

65536 opens its mouth as wide as it can at him and points to its fangs before closing it.

"Drone teeth aren't sharp enough to cause that," it points at the shredded neck, "At least not by accident like what happened here."

"Ahem," Celestia clears her throat, "What I meant was if you had any idea who *in particular* those changelings were."

“Uhh, no?” 65536 looks at her, “I can recognize a top rank because... they’re big and scary, but that’s all.”

With a sigh, Celestia looks at Beacon.

“That’s what I feared,” her voice takes on an official tone, “Grandmaster, we have a cluster of unknown changelings in Canterlot who have already killed a Royal Guard. If neither 65536 nor Miss Fury have any idea who they are, we can’t simply contact them and have them face Luna’s trial. Despite Miss Fury’s and 65536’s friendly presence in the castle, consider the group of changelings hostile. However, if you find them and they surrender, be lenient. If they fight...” her voice drifts off.

“Understood,” Beacon nods and vanishes in a flash of light.

“Umm,” 65536 peeps, “Speaking of Luna, she’s been gone for nearly a week again. Can’t we... look for her or something?”

Celestia pats 65536’s head.

“I told you before - it would be foolish. Our inability to navigate or manipulate the dreamscape would only force her to split her attention from whatever she’s doing towards us. Be patient and trust in my sister. She returned to you before and will do so again.”

65536 lets out a squeaky sigh, but far be it for a drone to defy a high rank.

“As for you, Commander,” Celestia turns to Sharp, “You are here because of your closeness to 65536 here as well as this incident happening on your watch. I expect a full report as well as Nightguard support in searching the sewers through which the changelings got here.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Sharp salutes, “Now if you don’t mind, I’ll take 65536 away. No offense to the Royal Guards, but you saw in what shape they brought the little guy here.”

Celestia nods.

65536 asks Sharp to drop it by Half-hearted Fury's guest suite, and once the Nightguard Commander says goodbye and leaves to prepare the reports and support for the EIS staff, the drone knocks on Fury's door.

"Whoever that is, you got the wrong suite!" Fury's voice comes from the inside.

"Nu uh!" replies 65536, knocking again.

"There's a changeling inside!"

"And also a changeling outside!"

"Oh for crying out loud..." accompanied by annoyed grumbling, hoofsteps begin approaching the door, "Oh fuck- WHO LEFT THE CHAIR HERE?! Ow- Crest, I'm gonna use your balls as a bola if you-OW! HOOFO BLOCKS?! WE DON'T EVEN HAVE HOOFO. Owww, my whole holes-damned leg hurts now," a tumbling noise as well as a bounce follow, "ARRRGH! Hive almighty! A bed... if nothing else, I should remember where *the damn bed* is."

"I can hear you getting closer!" calls out 65536 helpfully, "You're doing great!"

Some more grumbling later, the door clicks open, revealing Fury scowling in a vaguely downwards direction.

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to see if you were okay. Princess Sunbutt said the guards already talked to you about the escaped changelings and I wanted to see if they weren't as mean to you as they were to me."

"If the field upon which I grow my fucks wasn't barren, I would be touched," Fury rolls her eyes, "Now get inside before you yell even louder that a bunch of changelings just escaped the dungeons of the most magically secured place in Canterlot," she swings her foreleg to grab

65536, missing completely as the drone runs between her legs and into the suite.

65536 looks around.

Contrary to its expectations from Fury's cursing, the main room of the suite is neat and clean with the exception of a chair lying on the floor and a single, small, unexplained, colorful, brick-like block. Most furniture was moved towards the walls to create an open area in the middle of the room, clearly to prevent Fury from stumbling on anything.

"So, the guards weren't mean to you? They cuffed me and carried me off to the dungeons."

"Considering how boring it is with Crest doing guard things, I would gladly take several hunky stallions cuffing me, carrying me off to the dungeons, put a spreader bar between my hind legs, put my front into a pillory, and rail-"

"But you have pillows right here," 65536 interrupts her, hopping on the bed, "Look!"

A thrown pillow bounces harmlessly off of Fury.

"Do I have to explain to you the concept of blindness, you walking, digging emergency ration?! Or do you want to try it out for yourse-"

Pomf!

A pillow number two harmlessly bounces off of her face.

"Hee hee hee," giggles 65536.

"RAAAWRGH!" Fury launches herself towards the bed, narrowly missing the drone jumping off and running towards one of the pillows on the floor.

"Fire in the hole!" it calls out.

"Hey, that's what Crest said yesterday when-"

Pomf!

“Hee hee hee,” 65536 scuttles off to pillow number two.

However, Fury just stands there now, hoof raised and eye twitching.

“I may be blind. I may not be as terrifying as I used to be. I may be in a new place I haven’t mapped out completely yet. BUT NO ONE INTERRUPTS - pomf!” the second pillow bounces off of her face, but this time she doesn’t even flinch or lose the train of thought, “MY SASSY MONOLOGUE!”

“Woooo!” 65536 starts stomping its hooves on the floor in applause, “You didn’t even pause. You’re the uninterruptible top rank!”

“And you’d better remember it,” Fury nods, poking around with her foreleg for the pillow, “Now, drone, tell me more about your day…” she says in a strangely sweet tone.

“Oh? So I didn’t want to do any more drawing today and Pink Sunset said-”

“Ah hah!” Fury’s hoof touches the pillow. However, without picking it up and aiming, she straight up kicks it directly at 65536, the force of the blow sending the drone tumbling.

“OH MY HOLES! THAT WAS AWESOME!” 65536 picks itself from the floor, “You didn’t even see me and-”

Wham!

Pillow two slams the drone against the wall. Harmlessly, though. Fury gives 65536 a smug grin.

“Yes, I *am* absolutely amazing, in *and* out of the bed-”

Bonk!

A double-hooved throw of the pillow, still containing the same amount of power as a marshmallow kiss, does the unforgivable yet again - interrupts her.

“You dun goofed, *buddy*,” she growls, picking the pillow up. This time, however, she doesn’t immediately throw it, because 65536 remains silent, instead sneaking around along the wall towards where the other pillow landed before.

Fury’s ears keep twitching, and her bloodthirsty grin does wonders to show her long, thick fangs of a warrior. Her head is turning from side to side, but she simply stands there, pillow at the ready.

With her inaction, 65536 feels safe enough to finally creep towards pillow number two, grab it with both forelegs, put it over its head, and throw!

Fury rises on her hind legs, snatches the pillow slowly arcing towards her from the air with one foreleg, and with the other throws her own pillow *directly* at 65536.

“EEP!” the drone squeaks in surprise and amazement as not just the first but even the second pillow hit it in quick succession, and when it pops its head from underneath, the first thing it sees is Fury’s grinning mouth.

She softly smacks 65536 over the head before sitting down.

“That’s what you get from challenging a top rank. Now clean up the mess.”

Smiling from ear to ear, 65536 puts both pillows back on the bed, fluffs them up, and while it’s there it folds the blanket and everything. When it’s done, it notices Fury sitting by the now open window, her muzzle resting on the sill and her eyes closed.

65536 walks over to her, and when she doesn’t say anything, it asks:

“Do you want to go outside?”

“I’m not supposed to. Officially, it’s so that I don’t hurt myself in an unknown area. In reality, it’s so that one of those guard assholes doesn’t try to whack me behind a shed. I hate being cooped up...”

“Really?” 65536’s ears perk up, “The outside is nice, but I miss curling up in a cozy tunnel. I usually sleep under a bed when I’m alone.”

“Yes, you’re a drone. I’m not,” says Fury simply.

“Oh my gosh! You didn’t even need eyes to see that,” 65536 gasps in obviously fake amazement.

“One more quip like that and we’re playing basketdrone. Fair warning, I dribble a lot.”

“I can get you a bib,” 65536 beams at her as she almost genuinely growls back at it, and realizes its mistake, adding quickly, “I’m sorry, I was just joking. Ponies usually know it even if I kinda muck it up because I smile at them a lot but you can’t see it,” it reaches up towards Fury’s mouth, and traces a corner curling up with its comparatively tiny hoof. First on one side, then on the other.

“Look, *drone*, I went from rank Sixteen to a cripple in a single moment. I was respected and I was feared. Now, every moment I spend blind like this makes it less and less likely I will be able to heal myself even if I eventually gain enough love.”

“But that Crest pony loves you.”

“So what?!” Fury snaps at it, “How many ponies do you think *loved* me, even without mind control? Love fades over time, that’s why we always need a new target, a new *victim*. I like him, don’t get me wrong, and I feel it’s different from any time before, but I know how this song and dance goes, and I know my time is limited. Eventually, he will either leave or his love will weaken to the point where it won’t sustain me, I won’t be able to find a new victim like this, and I will starve,” she sighs and her voice loses its sharp edge, “But, for now, as long as I try hard enough not to think about it, it’s working.”

65536 wibbles at her. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t work.

“I’m wibbling at you, Miss Fur-, Sixteen,” it says.

“You can use Fury. Using my old rank now feels like you’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you, Sixteen. I’m *wibbling* at you. Big difference.”

“This is why we don’t talk to the drones, this is why we eat you...”

“I’m still wibbling at you, *Sixteen*.”

“Stop it!”

“I’m wibbling harder.”

“Stop narrating yourself!”

“Oh, like in those wordy books! Ahem- and 65536 wibbled with all its power at Sixteen, gradually making her into a changeling much nicer to herself.”

“If you keep narrating yourself, you’ll grow hair on your hooves. Plus, what in all wet and tight holes were you reading? Foal books?”

“Yep,” 65536 nods, “Luna and Sharp said those had all the easy words I should get used to before I get to the long and scary words like marmalade-oops!” it clamps its forelegs over its mouth, “Okay, I admit I read ahead.”

The conversation stalls again until 65536 asks:

“So, do you want to go outside with me, Sixteen? I’m allowed to. There’s even a maze in the gardens.”

Fury ponders it for a moment before standing up and snarling at the window.

“Fine. Let’s show those Royal Fucks that we’re not afraid of them!”

“Yaaay!” 65536 cheers, “Can I ride you?”

“If you do a good job guiding me around, I can grow a dick and let you be my fleshl-” she pauses, “How are you doing that? Why can I *feel* you staring blankly at me now?”

“Luna told me that whenever you start talking like that I should just keep staring at you like this until you stop. She said you were bad for my upbringing, whatever that means.”

“Did she understand I was blind? I mean, she *did* feel a little archaic on the uptake but I think they already invented blindness in her time.”

“Did the silent staring work?”

“...yes...”

“See? Luna is smart.”

“No, I don’t see. That’s the problem.”

“Huuuh...” 65536 looks at Fury with a smile, “You’re *right!*”

The warrior lets out a sigh mixed with an irritated growl, repeating:

“...this is why we *eat* drones, don’t talk to them...”

“The curse of being incredibly delicious, we know.”

“Grrrnngghh-” Fury pauses, “Huh, now I know how Crest feels when he talks to me. What a chance for character growth...” she shakes her head, “Nope, messing with him is too much fun.”

“Sooo...” is all 65536 says.

“Fine, hop on. And you’d better be on point with your instructions because, for some reason, I can’t tap into your head.”

65536 flies up on Fury’s back and points directly ahead with zero effect for obvious reasons.

“Straight ahead, Sixteen. I hit a door really hard during the big kaboom. But then I landed in Luna’s place and everything was okay.”

Slowly and carefully, Fury starts following 65536’s instructions.

“You like the night princess a lot, don’t you?” she asks as she reaches the suite door, opens it, and walks out into the castle hallway.

“She makes everything alright,” beams 65536, “You think I’m silly, don’t you? Left.”

“It might shock you, but I don’t,” Fury shakes her head, turning left, “It’s completely natural for a changeling to assure the well-being of their source of food.”

“Well, Luna is lost in this dreamscape thing. I read a bit about it in a book in her room but I didn’t understand much. Did you know Luna writes her own books and draws those complex pictures? Anyway, princess Sunbutt doesn’t want to go look for her because she thinks we’d only be a burden.”

“I mean, far be it for me to question her royal cake plot in regards to magic, but it might be possible that Luna keeps her secrets close. Considering that she returned from her exile recently, there might be things at her place that even Celestia doesn’t know.”

“Oh? You mean like her cleaning stick!” 65536 adds, “Stop. Turn left. Stairs down. Two hooves high each. Three hooves long.”

“Cleaning stick? What’s so secret about a cleaning stick?” Fury starts descending the stairs, probing each step to make sure that 65536’s directions are accurate.

“It was in Luna’s cleaning drawer full of weird thingies. It vibrates and goes back and forth on its own. It’s great for cleaning holes. Once you put some fluff on it because it doesn’t slide so well on its own, that is,” after a second, 65536 adds, “I tried it myself.”

Fury misses a step as her brain momentarily short-circuits, but catches herself by step three and stops herself from falling.

“Which holes...?” she asks with a suspicion.

“All of them! Well, not my nostrils, it’s too thick for that, but all of my cup holders. Ears too! It made my noggin buzz.”

“Uh huh,” mumbles Fury, suddenly smirking, “You know what? I think I’m starting to like you.”

“Yaaaaay!”

“Now, how about you tell me about all the *other* things you saw in Luna’s *cleaning* drawer. Don’t miss the tiniest detail,” she chuckles, “Crest is gonna *love* this.”

As evening falls on Canterlot, a peculiar sight greets Pink Sunset who is on guard by Luna’s door this shift.

A cardboard box with ‘boks’ written on its top is shuffling along the floor and mumbling quietly:

“...sneaking sneaking sneaking sneaking...”

The box is obviously completely unaware of the Royal Guard closely following it.

Pink Sunset salutes to the Royal Guard and gestures to him to move along. The unicorn nods in response and leaves.

The box turns towards Pink Sunset, showing a black slit cut into its front that’s letting out a teal glow from two spots.

“Stop! I’m under strict orders to not let any boxes into Princess Luna’s suite. No exceptions,” says the batpony sternly.

The box flips over, revealing a changeling.

“You thought it was a box, but it was me, 65536!”

Pink Sunset fakes a gasp before leaning down and patting the drone’s head.

“Why were you hiding? You could just put your Nightguard armor on and walk around freely.”

“It’s because of the changeling thing that happened last night in the dungeons. The Royal Guards look kinda nervous.”

“Hmph,” Sunset frowns, “Makes sense, but I think it would still be better if you wore your official armor. That way if anything happens, you’ll have the Commander to back you up.”

“Okay!” 65536 nods, “Buuut, can I go in now that I’m not a box?”

“Put that box back where you found it and I’ll let you in. We can’t have you making a mess in mom’s suite.”

65536 salutes, and with practiced precision puts the box on its back. Drones are carrier experts.

“I’ll be right back!” it trots off.

Not even ten minutes later, 65536 finds itself in Luna’s suite again, eyeing the bookshelf next to Luna’s bed.

“Hmm... where to begin?” it mutters.

Author's Notes:

Remember how I said there would be several events which won't get much of an explanation and are here only for time synchronization with the overall timeline? Yes, Fury's arrival is number one and the changeling escape from Canterlot is number two.

Fury's arrival links to - "Hard to Find the Right Words" story.

Changeling escape links to - "An Exercise in Management" story.

Anyway, my notes say that next up will be - Lumber camp changelings again, with Bright Star and the rangers getting closer.

1988, 9999: 11

Things aren't what they should be. A mind that by no means should be aware of its situation suddenly is. This has *never* happened before, not only within the mind currently waking up, but also in the living memory of everyone connected to it. A drone who was forcibly hibernated by a high rank never woke up again. Ever.

However, the bringer of the Shiny is, in the minds of every drone currently sleeping on a small pile in the center of the changeling camp, no ordinary drone.

With a confused moan, 9999 wakes up and gasps as it starts sliding down from the side of the pile and lands on the soft ground. Curiously, its descent doesn't seem to have woken anyone up, and the mental presences nearby reveal that every single changeling who remained in the lumber camp is currently piled up here.

9999 turns away from the pile-

Oh goopy holes!

-and nearly swallows its tongue when faced with a pair of teal eyes staring directly at it. Heart beating like a jackhammer, 9999 smiles at the Silent watching the drone and pats its head.

"What happened here?" whispers 9999, "Why am I awake?"

The Silent only stares, clearly unable to react to the complexity of the questions. After a quick check of the hive mind to see if everyone is okay, 9999 nuzzles its neck and adds:

"Nevermind, buddy. Good job keeping an eye on things."

It will be easier and vastly less tiring to simply ask why everyone, including 1988, is asleep on one big pile later than to examine the recent hive mind

memories. However, an unusual reminder pops up inside 9999's head - one unfinished task.

Objective: Nightly patrol

Tools: 17070's helmet

Route: -xn995Dsfaa-4xSS99965-dsew25xx-

9999 scratches its head.

*With everyone here, there's no one left to watch out in case of trouble.
Maybe I should wake 1988 up?*

9999 tiphooves over to the sleeping infiltrator's hind legs sticking out of the pile and ponders poking them.

Or maybe not. They all need the rest. Besides, I can do the patrolling myself, I think. It looks like I have enough love to last a few hours, even though I have no idea how I got it, the route coordinates are clear, and- why do we have a helmet?

With a shrug, 9999 walks over to the makeshift changeling helmet stuck on a low-hanging branch nearby, or more likely a charred pot reinforced with goop and with a missing chunk where, presumably, one's face is supposed to go. When the drone leans in to examine it closer, the hive mind presents a tooltip:

Item: 17070's helmet

Use: 4 portalling!

Instructions: Put on head, muzzle into hole.

Hive mind knows best and 9999 isn't going to argue, so it puts the helmet on and whispers towards the Silent who is observing its every move:

"Keep an eye on everyone. We're drones, we can't just leave hive mind tasks hanging. That never ends well."

The Silent doesn't react but also doesn't move to either stop or follow 9999, which the drone considers a victory as it leaves the camp behind.

To a pony, the nighttime forest would be a quiet place for contemplation, its silence only broken by the hoofsteps of the patrolling drone. For said patrolling drone who is used to the complete silence of underground tunnels, though, the forest is loud and alive with leaves and grass whispering in the breeze, occasional hooting of an owl and other wildlife noises completely unidentifiable by 9999. Thanks to that, the patrol is taking longer than a casual stroll, as the drone always either freezes and quickly starts scanning the area, or straight up jumps behind the nearest cover.

So far, however, nothing has happened, and 9999's glowing eyes are illuminating the way, allowing it to see with more clarity that a pony would in broad daylight. Unfortunately, 9999's excellent ears are working against it, since hearing all the noises around makes it difficult to make out any specific one.

Crack!

9999 lunges directly forward, because it's been looking in that direction and its instincts tell it that way is the safest. Only once it's cleared the jump distance, it turns its head and drone instincts save 9999 like many times back home. When in danger, drones instinctively run, and 9999's legs push it to the side just in time to avoid a changeling pouncing 9999's way.

No, not a changeling. It's one of those fake, changeling-looking *things* who attacked 1988 and supposedly took the rest of the Riverside changelings away, never to be seen again.

The monster is the size of an infiltrator, though, and its long legs allow it to step over 9999 before the drone can get back on all fours and run again. It opens its mouth beyond what even a changeling can do, revealing a mass of slithering tentacles which start rapidly approaching 9999's head.

A memory flashes through 9999's mind.

They didn't try to directly kill 1988 nor anyone else. The one who attacked 1988 scared him unconscious, and the ones who attacked the rest just nabbed them.

All four of 9999's hooves flash green.

For the hiiiiive!

Like a cat lying on its back and scratching the hand rubbing its belly, 9999 flails with all its legs against the attacker.

One hoof easily cleaves away the tentacles which scatter all over 9999 who doesn't stop flailing, although now rather blindly.

Foreleg number two reaches higher, taking off a chunk of the monster's head and making it reel back.

Hind leg hits are even less coordinated, but as the monster keels over to the side, 9999 realizes it must have cut off a leg or something.

Pushing itself backwards, 9999 creates a short distance between itself and the gurgling monstrosity, and with a quick look at the monster flailing aimlessly on the ground, the drone starts swatting away monster bits off of itself while shuddering with every wet squelch.

"Ewww..." 9999 whispers.

Unlike a pony would, or anyone else really, it doesn't gloat, check the monster up close, or do anything foolish. It simply flees along the prescribed patrol path.

Drone power! Woohoo!

9999's internal clock keeps ticking minutes away. Since the previous encounter, the drone has been wary of every noise, but so far it hasn't heard anything suspicious.

Crack!

9999 freezes this time, eyes wide, until it slowly breathes out a moment later and raises its hoof from a branch snapped in half.

“...ooof, just me...” it whispers.

When it raises its eyes from the ground, it sees a strange, dark green bulge rising up from the ground directly ahead.

“Eep! Another spook!” squeaks 9999, pondering its options. Abandoning the mission and running back is a non-decision, so it’s mostly just recalculating the new patrol route.

At the same time, however, the top of the bulge moves back, revealing an earth pony’s head and identifying the ‘big bulge’ as a completely covering cloak with a hood made for almost perfect invisibility in a forest environment. Clearly, the pony was aware of 9999 approaching.

“Damn it, another one,” he says and points his foreleg at 9999, a glowing golden gem held in his hoof.

Those words confuse 9999. The situation requires a clarification.

“Hey, you’re not a spook!” it points back, “Are you from the camp?”

“They can talk?” mutters the pony.

“Sure we can! These days, I can even do it without a high rank nearby.”

The pony lowers his hoof, gasping.

“You’re not one of the monsters, you’re a changeling from Riverside!”

“Uh oh...” and *that* is where 9999 bolts.

Whoever he is, he’s not from the camp. If he knows about Riverside and changelings, he’s looking for us. There’s no way he’s friendly. Goop, I can’t lead him to the camp.

“Get over here!” the pony calls out.

“I DON'T THINK THAT'S A GOOD IDEA!” 9999 yells back, quickly changing direction after the response to throw the pony off of its trail.

9999's entire body involuntarily lurches forward as something hits its head. It hurts and 9999 quickly feels something dripping down the side of its muzzle, but it's clear that nothing important is leaking out because it can still keep running.

The helmet!

The pony's hoofsteps are slowly getting closer. He might not be able to see clearly like 9999, but he definitely knows way better how to move in the forest.

Soon, 9999 begins noticing flashes of light coming through the line of trees to the left, and starts to take in loud commotion and chaos, something it must have missed completely only due to the noise of blood hammering in its ears and the thudding of its hooves against the ground.

“What the hay?” 9999 hears the pony curse from behind before he changes direction and gallops towards the explosions of bright lights.

Finally left alone, 9999 hides behind a thick tree, gasping for breath and trying not to pass out.

I think I'm gonna be sick. Drones aren't made for running. We're made for digging and carrying. Bad decision...

With trembling forelegs, 9999 touches the hurting place on its head and finds something that shouldn't be there. Something is... sticking out of its head? Twisting its body to reach the 'sticking out thingy' with both forelegs, 9999 grabs it and pulls.

“Ouch!” it hisses, examining the short crossbow bolt, splattered with green blood, that was lodged in its head, “I thought only unicorns shot things at others. Earth ponies were the ones who smacked hard up close.”

Next, 9999 takes 17070's helmet off, noticing the hole where the bolt pierced it.

17070, I gotta give you something nice when I get back.

With its breathing calming down, 9999 starts taking in more details of the chaos a short distance away.

Pony voices are barking orders, there's clanking of metal against... something, and shockwaves occasionally rock 9999's tree with a loud *whoom!*

The drone ponders simply leaving and following the set patrol route, but this definitely *does* seem like something to report to 1988 later, so it peeks out from behind its tree. puts the helmet back on, goops the bolt to its leg hole and, seeing no immediate danger, starts sneaking towards what must be some kind of a battle.

The continuous stream of loud orders means nothing to 9999. However, it recognizes the fake changelings fighting the ponies more than well. Ponies like the one who ambushed and shot 9999 are holding a circle against the monsters, their weapons ineffectively bouncing off of the enemies. Most of the time, that is. Occasionally, a pony's weapon glows bright yellow in tune with a flash of a horn belonging to one of the three unicorns in the center of the circle, and it hacks through or pierces the monster's skin. The problem is that while there might be dozens of attackers, there are only under twenty defenders.

Suddenly, a bright beam of light shooting from the sky envelops a heavily armored unicorn, different from all the others, standing in the middle of the circle.

“VANISH, DEMONS OF NIGHTMARES!” cries out the unicorn.

The beam erupts into a slowly spreading golden explosion which evaporates the monsters as it passes through.

9999 can only stand there, starstruck, before the shiniest of all shinies slowly flowing towards it and eventually passing through without any effect. Pretty much on instinct, 9999 vocalizes its amazement:

“That was the biggest shiny I’ve ever seen!”

Despite all the suddenly busy cloaked ponies, the unicorn hears it.

“A *real* changeling?” he asks, starting to stride towards 9999, “Stay where you are!”

9999’s legs prove smarter than its probably scratched brain as the drone starts running again while replying:

“I already told your friend no!”

Despite wearing the heaviest-looking armor 9999 has ever seen, the unicorn is still *faster*. That’s probably just the exhaustion. Unfortunately, like before, 9999 can’t afford to run towards the lumber camp.

Digging and carrying, dummy! That’s what you’re for.

I can’t carry that guy and I don’t want to dig him!

Dig a hole, 9999!

9999 slows down, and then makes a sharp turn to the side just as the unicorn lunges to grab it, misses, and tumbles on the grass.

The drone needs only a moment to take a deep breath, dive into a raised bank, its forelegs shimmering green, and pretty much *swim* into the solid ground, leaving behind a hole and a continuous spray of dirt coming out of it until it makes an impassable barrier.

Bright Star can only call out:

“Changeling, I’m not about to harm you if you give in!”

Unfortunately for him, the only answer are the worried calls from the ranger camp. Since the changeling can seemingly burrow into any direction at unreal speed, there's not much point in trying to figure out where it would surface. Instead, it's time to tend to the wounded. Besides, now he knows they're looking in the right area. The remaining question is - for how long?

Limping and seeing double out of exhaustion after completing the patrol route, 9999 stumbles back into the changeling camp. The pile of drones is still covering 1988, the Silent is still watching them as instructed, with only a single look at the returning 9999. Seeing that everything is safe, whatever tension that was holding 9999 upright finally snaps, and the drone collapses on the ground with a loud 'thud!'.

"Ow..." is all it can groan.

A moment later, it feels a poke into its side. Another, and another. Straining itself, it turns on its back, only to see the Silent leaning over it with something approaching an expression of worry.

"...I'm okay, buddy..." breathes out 9999, "...just tired..."

The Silent looks at 9999, then at the pile, at 9999, and at the pile again before disappearing from 9999's field of view.

Shortly after, 9999 hears a confused:

"Ow! Which one of you twerps just bit my leg?!"

1988's irritated question is answered by a chorus of:

"Not me!"

"I didn't!"

"Mouth completely closed!"

"What happened? Why are everyone's mouths opening!"

"...hi, guys..." groans 9999.

Everything goes quiet as the drones all look at 9999 before an explosion of voices.

“HIGH SCORE IS BACK!”

“THE SHINY BRINGER ROSE UP AFTER BEING HIBERNATED!”

“SHI-NY! SHI-NY! SHI-NY!”

“YOU’RE AWAKE!”

9999 finds itself looking up at a circle of amazed and smiling faces, and feels warmth flow through its body.

Are they giving me love without knowing?

“Be gentle,” 9999 chuckles, pushing itself up into a sitting position.

1988 pushes 36658 to the side, joining the circle.

He’s an infiltrator, he has to know what they’re doing.

The drones turn to face him.

“See? High Score is the real Shiny bringer!”

“And 9999 is the real High Score!”

“The only drone who woke up on its own.”

“It can do a warrior transformation AND it can’t be stopped by hibernating!”

“Enough!” 1988 raises his voice, ignoring the drones, “Explain what happened.”

“I woke up while you were all sleeping,” 9999 nods towards the Silent now sitting behind the circle around the mighty Shiny Bringer, “I noticed an unfinished objective in the hive mind, so I took the helmet as instructed and left to do it. I... I think we’re in trouble, 1988. I need you to scour my head for everything I saw and anything I might have missed while running, second after second. You’ll understand better than I ever could.”

“No,” says 1988, “It has to wait. You’re too weak and, in case you forgot, you have a *hole in your head*.”

“Exactly, that’s why-”

1988 turns around.

“36658, try your new drug on 99- *High Score*. 20100, you’re on night watch. Swap with 57999 after four hours. 17070, you’re the best at manipulating small things, you’re helping me with cleaning up and dressing the wound.”

“Before all that-” 9999 takes the helmet off, presenting it to 17070 and saying mentally, “*Thanks. Without it, I’d be a dead pile with a sharp stick lodged in my head.*”

17070 gasps in disbelief.

“I... my helmet saved the Shiny Bringer...”

“*I want you to have this,*” 9999 presents the exquisitely crafted ranger crossbow bolt to the other drone, “*You earned it.*”

17070 wibbles at 9999 while taking the gift. Everyone present knows that, in reality, it could easily be the most valuable item a drone ever had.

“This is amazing...” whispers 17070, looking at the bolt from all sides, “It’s so hard... and sharp... and- I gotta make a new helmet first thing tomorrow! A non-explosive one!”

“Wait, what?” 9999 freezes.

1988 chuckles.

“You just might really be divinely blessed, because if that bolt hitting the helmet or your head made a spark, that Shiny Bringer moniker would be even more literal than now,” he simply leaves the sentence hanging before hissing at the standing drones and saying, “What are you all staring at us and waiting for? I gave you your orders!”

Author's Notes:

Not much to say here. Bright Star is closing in. Time is running out.

Next up - 1313 and Zamira explore first clues regarding the assassin who tried to kill 65536.

1313: 8

Zamira would call the past week spent by asking around mercenary and guard bars exciting albeit, unfortunately, not exactly rewarding. 1313 would disagree with the first part while he was washing stale beer thrown his way out of his mane and coat in the shower almost every evening. The fact that Zamira was there as well, “helping”, made matters a lot better, though.

Hopefully, tonight will be different thanks to a clue they paid handsomely for.

As 1313, his mane and coat dyed black and grey due to Blueblood being far too recognizable, and Zamira approach the “Rusty Blade” bar, they’re immediately spotted by a bulky pegasus with an eyepatch standing by the entrance, who keeps watching them walk all the way while smoking a cigarette.

“He’s inside, sitting at the bar,” he growls when faced with Zamira’s raised eyebrow up close and presents a hoof.

1313 reaches into his saddlebag for a pouch of coins but Zamira shakes her head, interrupting him.

“You’ll get the second half of the bits once we’re done here.”

“Missy-” the pegasus spreads his wings threateningly.

“There’s only one exit out of here,” Zamira rolls her eyes, grabs 1313 by the ear, and pulls him inside.

Ignoring the pegasus merc further, they enter the Rusty Blade and immediately spot a solitary unicorn at the bar wearing a rather sophisticated cast covering one of his forelegs. They’re being watched as they walk between the tables, but their target unicorn is one of the few armed ponies not paying them any attention. Once they get closer and the heavy stench of liquor surrounding him assaults their nostrils, it becomes clear why.

A bar stool on each side of him fills up, Zamira taking the right one and 1313 taking the left.

“Heeeya, buddy,” Zamira gives the unicorn a friendly smile.

“You this guy’s friends?” growls the bartender, approaching the newcomers.

“Wha-?” the unicorn gives Zamira a hazy look.

“You could say that,” replies Zamira with a smile, “We’re a pair of *curious* friends who only want to ask a few questions.”

“Missy,” the bartender glares at her with sudden irritation, “Ponies in a certain line of work stick together and, sometimes, the answers you’re looking for aren’t worth the trouble.”

1313 looks around at the majority of ponies sitting at the tables now watching them while playing with knives, cudgels, horseshoe blades, and overall a variety of heavily customized weapons.

“I’m sure that,” Zamira raises her voice, “*breaking and entering into Canterlot castle and thankfully unsuccessfully attempting to murder Princess Luna’s close friend*,” she lowers it again, “might warrant an explanation or two.”

The unicorn can only make the first semblance of movement before Zamira grabs his cast and slams it against the bar counter, making him groan in pure agony and collapse on the counter while the situation in the room calms down somewhat.

“You sure about that guy?” asks the bartender.

“Yes, the survivor drew us a picture and did this,” Zamira puts pressure on the crippled hoof again to wake the unicorn up, “to him. We just want to know on whose orders he did it. We might even let this small fry go afterwards.”

The unicorn groans.

Zamira grinds his hoof against the wood.

“I. Didn’t. Hear. You.”

“Aaaaaaaargh!” screams the unicorn.

“Stop!” says the bartender sternly as he slams his own hoof against the counter, “I understand he did something heinous, but nopony here exactly has a clean slate. Either take him to prison and question him there or ease up. You won’t be torturing anypony here.”

To 1313’s surprise, Zamira lets the unicorn’s ruined leg go.

“So, what’ll it be, buddy?” she leans closer, unbothered by the stench of liquor, “Are you talking to us or should we ask Princess Luna to put your brain through the wringer?”

“You ‘ere bout the bug m-monster?” the unicorn gives her an exhausted look while slurring his words, “Tha’ worst job ev’r...”

“Bartender!” Zamira raises her voice, “Cold water, please.”

Once the mug arrives, she helps the unicorn drink it.

“Now try to wake up and speak like a pony,” the zebra adds, “I’m not about to spend my youth deciphering your blabbering. And you’d better try *really hard* or I’ll have my hired muscle here,” she nods towards 1313, “have a chat with you outside. Well, I say chat but you’ll be helping him learn his math using your teeth. And let me tell you, subtracting is the *easy* part.”

1313 only grunts, mostly because he’s trying his best not to tremble under *sooo many* heavily armed ponies’ stares.

“T’was that weird rich colt...” grumbles the unicorn, “Fleshlight or whatever-”

“Torchlight?” asks Zamira. When the unicorn nods, she adds, “You deal with him personally? That sounds so stupid of him.”

The unicorn shrugs, carefully articulating his next words.

“The hay do I care? He paid well, said that a bug monster got into the castle, and that I had to kill it. Little shit kicked my leg off...”

“Got any proof?” asks Zamira.

“The cast you just ruined, zeeb,” he growls, clearly slowly waking up from his drunk stupor due to pure adrenaline.

“About Torchlight, smartass. I’m halfway to letting you go but I can still just drag you off to the castle.”

“I don’t,” he breathes out in defeat, “Met him a few times, got my orders, got paid in cash. No paper trail at all.”

“Hmph!” Zamira huffs, tapping her hoof against the counter while thinking.

“Then I guess we have no choice,” 1313 speaks out, “You’re going to help us a bit more-”

“Haaay no!” the unicorn turns towards him.

“-and you will get paid extra to leave Canterlot and never return. You will visit Torchlight and tell him the changeling survived-”

“No, no no no no!” the unicorn’s ears perk up as he pushes himself upwards, completely ignoring his ruined hoof this time, “I’m not going back there again! That bucker’s *weird*,” he shudders.

“Look, it’ll just be a quick visit-”

“NO!” his voice jumps up an octave.

“Calm down!” Zamira grabs him but he swats her away.

“I’m not going back there. Drag me off to prison or whatever but I’m not getting near that place ever again!”

“What the holes?” 1313 leans backwards while Zamira grabs the unicorn and forces him back down into a sitting position.

“Alright, buddy, we won’t do that, but we’ll need a signed confession. We’ll give you some time to GTBO before we give it to the guards, don’t worry about it,” despite her puzzled expression, she talks the unicorn down in the calmest tone she can muster.

“Yeah, sure,” he nods.

“Yo! Got a clean sheet of paper around here?” Zamira waves at the bartender who nods and walks off into the back room.

1313, though, has to ask:

“What got you so unsettled about Torchlight?”

“Look, ask this mare about him,” the unicorn rubs his temple with his healthy foreleg, “Stable Fade. Used to work there as a maid. Lives at 12 Stalwart Sun lane.”

The bartender returns with a notepad and a pen and puts it on the counter. Despite being drunk, the unicorn fires up his telekinesis and starts writing, slowly and meticulously, while 1313 reads every word depicting gaining access to the castle, messing with Raven’s memory, getting past Royal Guards on watch using Torchlight’s council seal, and unsuccessfully attempting to kill the changeling. Finally, he finishes the slow but detailed description with a signature.

“Hazard Pay,” reads Zamira, “Now, if I were you, my real name would be the last thing I’d put under a confession like that.”

“It’s not the only one I use,” Hazard Pay shrugs, “But if you’re worried about the nobles not believing this is real,” he nods towards the bartender, “You have a witness, you have details nopony should know, and-” he thinks for a second before his horn lights up, he presses it against the sheet of paper, and leaves a glowing mark on it, “-you have a magical signature. Once you walk through that door,” he nods towards the exit, “I’m finishing

my drink, paying my tab, and leaving Canterlot for good. It's not as if there isn't enough work in any big city in Equestria."

1313 looks at the bartender.

"Can you sign the confession as well as a witness? Just so that we don't have to come back here later," he tries to retain his burly tone but it loses its weight with such a polite question.

The pony shrugs and scribbles his name and the name of the establishment under Hazard Pay's.

Zamira smiles and shoves a gold coin across the counter towards him, saying:

"For your time."

With something finally in their hooves, 1313 and Zamira leave the bar and pay off their pegasus informant.

"So, do we just give this to Celestia?" asks Zamira when they're alone again, "It might not be good enough for a trial but it should give her an idea who to keep an eye on."

"We *could*," 1313 rubs his chin, "buuuut... aren't you curious about why he was acting the way he was?"

"Kinda," she admits, "You wanna pay that maid a visit?"

"Yep, but first we drop this off at home," he pats his saddlebag in which the signed confession is resting next to his emergency love source - Zamira's dreamcatcher, "Wouldn't want it to get damaged in case of any trouble."

"Got it."

With that, they head back through the deepening gloom of the evening towards Blueblood's estate.

Not even ten minutes later, Hazard Pay rushes out of the bar as promised. However, unlike 1313 and Zamira, as he's passing by one of many dead end alleys, two shadows swoop down from a nearby roof, quickly covering his mouth and disabling his horn using a magic suppressor, and pull him up on the roof again despite his violent struggling.

No pony has heard anything, no pony has seen anything, and the unicorn going in places by the name Hazard Pay has never been seen again.

"Stalwart Sun lane, number 12," 1313 stops in front of an apartment building in the mountainside quarter of upper Canterlot.

Zamira squints through the darkness at the barely lit number plaque to the left of the entrance.

"Let's hope the pinhead wasn't lying," she grumbles.

"Even if he was, we have his signed testimony as well as a picture," 1313 shrugs her concern off.

"Yeah, unless he spends the rest of his life dying his coat like we're doing now?" Zamira gives 1313 a skeptical glance.

"There are always clues to follow," 1313 shakes his head, even though he has to admit Zamira has a point. After returning home, his mane and coat remained dyed black and grey, but Zamira opted to cover her stripes and is now looking like a simple, brown earth pony mare with blond mane. Torchlight can't know who is asking around about his recent dealings, "Anyway, do we ring the bell and ask whoever owns the building where-

Zamira simply puts a hoof on the handle, pushes, and the door lets her inside.

"I don't know how it was in Appleloosa, but mailponies here are busy and can't waste time looking for the landlord of every place they need to deliver something to," she says as she leads the way through the barely lit hallway,

stopping only to examine a section of a wall covered with mailboxes, “Stable Fade... apartment 36,” she pokes the stack of papers sticking out of the mailbox, “Looks like she hasn’t checked her mail for a while.”

“I wouldn’t need to be an infiltrator to suspect that’s a bad sign,” comments 1313, following Zamira up what looks like a central staircase.

“Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn’t jump to conclusions,” Zamira shakes her head, “Most mail one gets in a big city like this are advertisement pamphlets,” she stops on the third floor and checks the first door to the left and to the right, “31. That way,” she nods to the right and gets going.

Several moments later, they’re standing in front of apartment 36. 1313 knocks on the door.

“Miss Fade?” he asks. No one answers, nor do his keen ears catch any noise from the inside, “Is *now* the time to jump to conclusions?” he looks sideways at Zamira.

“We’ll see-” she presses on the door handle which clicks, “Huh?” with a quick push, she lets the door swing open inside, “Guess who’s downright *amazing* with her hooves,” she forces a chuckle, unable to hide the twinge of nervousness in her voice as she peeks into the pitch black apartment, “All jokes aside, who would leave their door unlocked in this part of town?” she adds in a whisper.

1313 sniffs the air before gently pushing Zamira away and entering the apartment.

“Someone who’s not worried about being surprised anymore,” he scowls, flicking a light switch by the door.

“What are you doing?” hisses Zamira, watching 1313 sniff the air again and walk into the short hallway with a door on each side and one at the end.

Before answering, 1313 enters the door to the right, and Zamira hears him sigh.

“Come here...”

She does so, and her nose finally catches the moldy stench of decay that makes her gag and back off again.

“Oh gods,” she immediately reaches into her saddlebag and puts a scented bandanna over her muzzle, a standard tactic for a mercenary about to enter any hazard zone. One she hasn’t needed to use since landing the cushy job as Blueblood’s bodyguard, but one she used many times before.

Finally ready, she enters the kitchen and takes in the now expected scene.

An earth pony mare, presumably Stable Fade, is slumped in a chair, surrounded by a pool of coagulated blood on the floor.

“She slit her fetlocks,” 1313 comments, examining the deep cuts on both of the mare’s forelegs.

“But why?” Zamira shakes her head, “I know how much Blueblood pays his staff, and unless Torchlight was underpaying them super hard, losing a job shouldn’t have been such a problem. Besides, nobles are always hiring each other’s servants, if only to eventually overhear some gossip they can use against each other in the politics game.”

The two lights in the kitchen flicker at the same time.

“Doubly so, if she lives in a cheap apartment like this,” notes 1313, looking around and noticing an envelope on the counter, “Maybe this will explain something,” he walks over, “Bad family news or something else-”

The lights flicker again as he reaches for it, and the moment he touches the paper, they go out completely.

“Umm, lovebug?” Zamira, standing by the kitchen door, immediately slams her hoof into the light switch with zero effect.

To 1313, light or pitch darkness makes little difference even in pony form, so unlike the zebra, he sees Stable Fade rise up from the chair in a jerky, uneven motion accompanied by cracking of bones and sinew. The mare’s

hoof splits open into an abominable facsimile of claws with which she grabs the kitchen knife she used to kill herself.

“ZAMI!” 1313 lunges forward just as Stable Fade does the same, far too quickly for a body limited by pony physiology, “GET OUT!”

He manages to push the zebra back into the hallway but grits his teeth as the thick kitchen knife buries into his back. In the next second, the inequine claws grab his leg and pull him back into the kitchen.

The door slams closed.

Zamira reaches for the handle on instinct but the door fails to open. She clicks two golden hoops, one around each of her forelegs’ fetlocks, together which makes them faintly light up.

“RUUUUN!” she hears from the inside.

Something heavy slams into the door from the other side, splattering the glass top part with blood.

“...help me...!” she hears an exhausted groan clearly belonging to 1313.

“DON'T LISTEN TO IT! GET OUT!” shrieks 1313.

Zamira turns away from the door...

...and bucks as hard as she can, kicking it off of the hinges.

This big booty isn't just for show.

A quick look backwards reveals 1313 on the floor while Stable Fade swings her twisted hoof to shove the door away from herself, her mouth hanging ripped open into a grin filled with eel-like rows of teeth.

Using the ex-maid's moment of distraction, Zamira repositions and bucks her away... or she tries to. A pony's neck would snap under the powerful kick, and it does, but Stable Fade's head rights itself with a series of sickening crunches.

“Tried that, didn’t work!” blurts out 1313, pushing Zamira away from himself and out of the way of Stable Fade’s swipe, “Run! I’ll make the collar blow up!”

“DON’T YOU *DARE!*” barks Zamira furiously, grabbing 1313’s saddlebag and violently ripping it off, “And buy me time!”

For 1313, it’s more instinct than bravery as he pushes himself up to block Stable Fade’s lunge at Zamira, making her land on his barrel again.

The mare rears, her teeth lengthen, and she bites down on his foreleg covering his face.

Crunch!

She rips it off, pushing 1313 against the floor with a victorious grin and locking her eyes behind him, presumably on Zamira.

He feels her legs tense in preparation for a lunge, and as she does so, he drags her down with his remaining foreleg.

“Would work on a pony, not on me,” he groans in agony as Stable Fade starts twisting in his weakening grasp.

Suddenly, her spine cracks as she rises backwards up like a snake, grabs 1313’s neck with one foreleg, and rams the other into his face. The agony of his muzzle bones shattering finally makes 1313 let go, and through a haze of blood in his eyes, he sees Stable Fade rise up for a second punch which will doubtlessly end with his brain splattering all over the floor.

Not even I can get back from that...

And I can’t even blow myself up because Zamira is right behind me...

“...work, you stupid thing, work...” he hears Zamira mumble, “Habash n’gik shang!”

A wave of blue light bursts out from behind 1313, almost physically pushing Stable Fade away.

“Habash n’gik shang!” Zamira keeps repeating over and over.

“It’s.. working?” 1313 gurgles through his obliterated, bleeding muzzle, as he sees Stable Fade withdraw.

“Habash n’gik shang!” Zamira says more aggressively, “Get up, pick up your leg, and *moovoove!*”

1313 pushes himself up, and risks a quick reach for his bitten off fetlock. It seems that Stable Fade can’t pass through the blue light emitted by...

...Zamira holding the glowing dreamcatcher and chanting.

With 1313 limping ahead, Zamira doesn’t stop facing Stable Fade who is following the blue bubble while pressing her open muzzle against the light until they leave the apartment and the main door slams shut, leaving them in the lit corridor of the building.

Gasping for breath and sweating as if she just ran a marathon, Zamira drops the dreamcatcher on the floor, her legs shaking from exhaustion. Next to her, 1313 is lying on the floor, pressing the bitten off part of his foreleg against the remaining stump. It’s clear that it’s reattaching itself badly, but they can always fix it when they get back home.

“Zami...?” 1313 croaks.

“Let’s... get out... of here...” she forces out of herself.

“Should we tell someone?”

“We can... leave... a tip... for the guards... later...” she lowers herself to help 1313 get up, “Now move...”

1313 rises up, not sure if he’s being propped by her or if her’s propping *her* up, but they’re soon limping away together, both knowing that if one of them fails, neither of them are getting up again.

It takes close to two hours for them to get back home. Two hours of constantly looking around, twitching at every movement, and unable to shake off the feeling of being followed. However, the Blueblood estate is well-lit, other zebra bodyguards are standing around, and there are servants awake in the middle of the night, some fixing up 1313 and others preparing a meal for Zamira.

Eventually, the two meet up again in Blueblood's study where the fireplace is crackling, all lights are on, and there are two zebras stationed outside just outside the door.

"Any idea what happened?" asks 1313, barely understandable over the amount of bandages keeping his face together.

Zamira shakes her head.

"But you stopped it," he keeps going.

"I doubt it," she shakes her head again, "It's still there. I told Zaida to immediately go and leave an anonymous tip at the guard station telling them to examine the apartment alongside a paladin."

"How did you know what to do with... the monster?"

"I didn't, but the other option was to leave you there to blow up," on the soft couch in front of the fireplace, Zamira leans against 1313, "I couldn't let my ticket to a cushy retirement get eaten by some eldritch horror."

"Heh, I'm happy to be useful," 1313 chuckles, "Got a new dreamcatcher by any chance? Whatever you did seems to have burned out all the love remaining inside it."

"It was what the shaman of my tribe back home called the 'Litany of Peaceful Rest'. Using dreamcatchers charged by the faith and unity of the tribe, it was used to help warriors relax after suffering a traumatic experience and to ward off the nightmares about the blank eyes of enemies they had to kill from following them into their dreams."

“Now I wish we had a lot more of them around, fully charged.”

Zamira smirks, points at the bed, and says:

“Wait there, close your eyes, and don’t open them until I tell you. I’ll show you something.”

As 1313 does so and sits down on the blanket, Zamira whistles. 1313 hears the door open, a set of hoofsteps softened by the thick carpet enter, and the door closes again.

The bed creaks, and Zamira says quietly:

“Open your eyes.”

In the darkness of the room now only lit by the fireplace covered by smoked glass, 1313 can see a zebra standing by the door, her coat covered in shimmering white markings.

Zamira, however, is sitting in front of him, her chest bearing the same glowing marks arranged into a familiar shape of the dreamcatcher. She pushes him down and pulls the blanket over them before draping her legs over his barrel.

“Here’s your fully charged one, lovebug,” she whispers.

1313 has never slept better in his life.

Author's Notes:

Re-reading this chapter, I realized I really shouldn't try horror. It reads like spooky alphabet soup.

Next up - back to the lumber camp.

156, 387: 11

The formless entity known to the few initiated as a Dreamweaver locks on a group of minds intruding into the dreamscape.

“Outsiders...”

A much more powerful will wraps around the Dreamweaver, immediately issuing orders. The will of a ‘young’, even when going by the terms of the timeless reality of the place, entity that usurped the dreamscape.

“Break them! Set us free!”

“How?” the Dreamwaver, on some level, understands that the previously unknown creatures called ‘changeling drones’ already ruined a shard of the dreamscape someone else created for them.

“Split them up,” replies the Tantabus.

31214 finds itself in a small room, sitting in a chair in front of a desk full of blinking and clicking things it has absolutely zero reference for. The only thing it can decipher with the limited help of the hive mind is that the piece of paper on the desk right in front of it has ‘Play this first’ written on it in a common pony script.

31214 takes the piece of paper, puts it to its mouth, and blows into it. Nothing.

“Do you mean... play drone ball? Like, you’re the ball?” it crumples the sheet of paper into a ball and throws it. The ball bounces off of a glass thingy on the opposite wall that can’t be a window because it’s not see-through. This doesn’t make anything noteworthy happen either.

On a second look, the paper was lying on a small, black rectangle seemingly filled with a narrow black foil wrapped on each side around a spinny thing connected to a hole. In the center of the rectangle there's a piece of paper with 'Instructions' written on it. 31214 blows into it. It fails to make any noise.

This requires further investigation.

"HA!" 31214 smiles triumphantly when it spots a box-like, open square thingy with two cogwheel-like protrusions sticking out of an indentation roughly the same size as the black rectangle thingy, "It puts the rectangle thingy into the rectangle hole-y... and the cogwheel holes fit!" 31214 presses against the raised part of the... uhh... thingy... and it... eats the smaller rectangle.

This is all new territory.

"Aww... all that thinky effort and still nothing," 31214 frowns, "What am I missing?"

Upon even closer examination, it finds some tiny raised squares on the rectangular thingy, each one covered with strange symbols. Carefully poking them reveals that only one seems to be able to move down, one with two triangles aiming to the right.

Click!

"Hello new hire!" a chipper voice comes from the black rectangle.

"Hi... black box thingy?" 31214 is standing on the chair like a spooked cat, its narrowed eyes locked on the box's spinning and humming insides.

"This is a training orientation cassette-"

"Hello train casket-" 31214 tries to communicate, but the thing seems to be ignoring him and just keeps going.

"-containing all the information a fresh-faced security guard might need in this job."

“Imma drone, I’m not a guard or warr-” 31214 tries again.

“Step one - watch the screens closely. If you see any movement, it means somepony got into the arcade and that you might be in trouble.”

“Oh no!”

“Step two - the buttons on the control panel turn various features of the arcade on and off. Starting from left to right - door control-”

“What’s a control panel? Where’s left? Slow down, I’m a drone, we’re not good with new things quickly-”

“-and that’s the control panel. Remember! Always use the correct distraction to buy yourself time and draw any problems away from your security booth.”

“I don’t remember! Again, please!”

“Step three -”

“No no no! Back to step zero! I dun wanna get eateeeeen if I break anything!”

“-the ventilation is broken-”

“IDIDN’TEVENDOANYTHINGYET!”

“-so if you keep the doors closed, you might pass out from the lack of air.”

“What?! Now that’s just a bad design, really...”

“Step four-”

“NOT AGAIN!”

“-you have limited amount of power-”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“-and the security doors open if power runs out so that nopony can get stuck in here without help.”

“Now *that* is smart. Why didn’t the same door guy design the ventilation?!”

“-And that’s about it, really. Now you know everything you need to know to get through the first night,” the black box thingy finishes its speech cheerfully, “See you tomorrow and good luck!”

“No no no no! I don’t know everything! Anything, really! Come on, boxy!”

Click!

Silence.

31214 slumps in the chair after no amount of poking makes the box talk again.

“Goop...” mutters 31214, looking around, “So... a table with buttons. A bunch of tiny glass... screens. Two door frames, one left and one right, with nothing resembling a door. A hole in the ceiling with something spinning in it. Limited air, that should be okay. Just like back home. Limited power, whatever that means,” 31214 taps its hoof against the desk in front of it, “If anyone knows about limited, it’s us drones. Right? So... buttons?”

Ready to hide at the first sign of trouble, 31214 presses the first button. With a hiss, a metal sheet slides down from the left door frame, sealing that particular entrance. Push number two makes it slide up again. Button number two makes something start beeping in the distance. 31214 waits a moment until it stops, and then presses the button again, repeating the whole thing.

“Ooookay, a bunch of noisemakers.” it tilts its head after some experimentation with the line of buttons on the presumed control panel, “Onto the next...”

Click!

The screens on the opposite wall begin showing pictures made of moving grey light, each a different one.

31214 freezes when *something* moves at the edge of one of the pictures. Next, it closes both doors to be safe.

A screen on the control panel itself showing a green bar made of smaller bars beeps, and one of the green bars disappears. Next to it, a different screen seems to be showing some weird square numbers.

31214 waits, watches the screens before trying the next control button. As soon as it's pressed, one of the screens showing a dim room lights up as a bulb in the ceiling temporarily turns on.

The drone examines the screen with its head tilted.

“Hmm, didn't the box say something about drawing something away from someth- me? What coul- ugghhhh?!” it chokes on its tongue as a large equine figure partially ripped to shreds and with wires and skeleton sticking out of missing chunks of its body shuffles into view and towards the light bulb and looks up, “Nothankyou!”

The green bar beeps again, and another smaller bar disappears. What could that mean?

Anyway, as long as the doors are closed, 31214 is safe. Time to spend its watch wisely.

“This chair spins around! Wheee!”

47989 opens its eyes and is immediately assaulted by a splitting headache. It tries to clutch its head but it finds that it can't move at all. A faint memory of a lake and a huge bonfire crosses its mind, immediately followed by another stab of pain. Ever since slipping and hitting its head on a rock, it's been getting these headaches but they were never as bad as now.

Still, a drone that can't move is bound to get eaten by a gribbler, or if it can't move when it's supposed to work it'll get sent to the crusher.

Some attempted turning around in its tight space reveals that it's completely stuck inside something that's moving already and it's full of tiny holes.

Did something eat me?

It can sense only one hive link nearby, but the moment it tries to connect to it, the headache returns stronger than ever.

“Hnnmllo?” it forces through a mouth it can barely open.

The motion stops.

For a moment, 47989 hears various noises of buzzing and clicking from all sides seemingly at random before whatever ate it starts moving again, this time faster and with a clear direction in mind.

Welp, since I got eaten already I can't get eaten again.

With that brilliant leap of logic, 47989 closes its eyes and tries to go to sleep, the slow shuffling of its unknown carrier doing wonders to help it drift off.

10013 finds itself facing a brown pony with a completely white face, a colorful mane styled into a zebro, and a big, round, red nose. Said pony is standing behind the counter of a metal cart covered with pictures the drone doesn't recognize.

Why am I here? I remember a big fire...

“Nothing is real. Trust your hive links and take care of the others.”

10013 is the second top ranked drone for a reason, even though it doesn't know it. Quickly assessing its situation, it gets ready to run, but with the

colorful pony not moving from behind the cart's counter, it opts for a question first:

“Who are you?”

Before answering, the pony puts a wooden stick into a vat in front of him, pushes a button, and the vat starts humming.

“Unlike you, someone who is supposed to be here.”

“Umm... I can leave if it's a problem,” 10013 tilts its head.

“No, you can't. You're being held here by a power that upset the balance, a power that wants to escape just like you. Right now, it's gradually succeeding.”

“Is that a bad thing? I mean, I just want to go back home too.”

The pony pulls the stick out, most of it now covered by some pink fluff, and offers it to the drone who reaches up to take it, sniffs it, and carefully gives it a lick.

“Mmmm!”

“If you eat the entire thing, you'll wake up,” says the pony.

10013 *stops*.

“Just me?”

“Yes. You, completely free to do anything you want. I know what you fear. No high ranks to threaten you, no queen to be afraid of, no monsters to chase you.”

As 10013 takes another bite, the pony's drawn-on smile widens.

“And everyone else will stay here. No one will know where I went. Right?”

“Exactly!” the pony leans over the counter, “You are the smart one, the one who will survive.”

10013 has ravenously devoured most of the offered cotton candy, leaving only a few final bits on the stick.

“You’re right. Most of the others can barely avoid a sizzly melter on their own or dig a tunnel in a way that wouldn’t make a high rank look for imperfections. I *am* the smart one,” it licks the side of the stick, “You know, this really *is* delicious.”

“You don’t need them.”

10013 looks at the final piece of pink fluff.

“Such a waste, really.”

“Your time on them? Certainly.”

“Oh? No, I mean having to waste the rest of this,” 10013 shakes the stick, “It’s delicious.”

“What?”

“High ranks get higher and grow more powerful by eating or outperforming each other. For us it’s different. For us it’s about how long we survive when *everything* wants to kill us. Do you think I started as 10013? Holes no. Most of us are dummies who accidentally die when we mistake something that rips them in half for a shiny,” the drone tosses the remains of the cotton candy away, “And if 9999 thought of us that way, I would have never gotten even past a hundred thousand,” 10013 growls at the pony as green shimmer passes through its carapace, burning away the clean, shiny exterior and replacing it with surface full of deep scars and grooves. Finally, one of 10013’s eyes loses its teal luster and turns blank grey, “We’re all weak and kinda dumb, but all that means is that know we have to watch each other’s back.”

10013's carapace and eye return to its neat state as the drone walks away, ready to bolt the moment it hears *anything* out of place behind it.

Nothing happens.

The monster realized that no threat it could make would square against the daily reality of the drones, and no promise it could give would win against the knowledge of certain death the drone would face on its own.

"You will not remember this.. bravado," growls a fading voice in the wind.

10013 keeps heading towards the nearest hive link it can sense.

"Good. Can't waste good head space on things that aren't about digging and carrying stuff."

19441 opens its eyes. It can faintly recall something about a lake and burning cabin, but any detailed memories are quickly fading into obscurity. An unusual thing for a changeling used to the accuracy of the hive mind, but to a drone this only means that said experience probably simply wasn't deemed worth retaining by a high rank or the hive mind.

"Keep an eye on each other... and have fun."

19441 blinks as 387's voice pierces through the haze of confusion regarding recent events. But hey, a high rank's order is a high rank's order.

I think I remember not being alone. So where's everyone?

There *are* faint traces of hive links in the back of its mind, but it's clear they're too far away to call.

Okay then, where am I?

19441 looks around. It's standing on some kind of a road, right in front of an open door belonging to a big, gloomy, derelict house. A wooden sign is hanging right above the door, one which 19441 reads out loud to itself:

“Haunted house,” it scratches its head, “Not sure what haunted means, but house means that someone might live there and they might know where the others are. Besides,” it peeks inside and smiles a bit when the narrow hallways put it at ease, “it feels like home.”

As it walks in-

BLAM!

“Eep!” 19441 lunges forward on instinct, but when no more noise follows, it looks around, “Huh, who closed the door?” it returns and tries the handle to no success, “Uh oh... did I break it somehow?”

Creeeeak!

“Huh?” the drone turns away from the door and looks into the hallway where a skeletal pony leg is now sticking out of a glass window in the wall. Head tilted in puzzlement, 19441 approaches and flies up to see eye-to-eye socket with a pony skeleton inside a booth behind the glass, “Huuuh.”

The skeletal leg moves, pointing down the hall, on the sides of which torches begin lighting up, bathing the hallway in eerie blue light.

“Thanks, but I can see just fine,” 19441 smiles at the skeleton, “Nice touch making those flames look like our eyes. I like that. High one!” it slaps the bony foreleg, but when it withdraws its own hoof, a chitinous hook gets stuck between the bones and 19441 pulls the foreleg easily off, “Oops, sorry,” the skeleton slumps against the glass, completely failing to spook 19441, “Here you go!” the drone shoves the skeletal foreleg back, pushing the skeleton off of its chair inside the booth and making it crumble to dust.

19441 looks around before shrugging.

Looks like no one wants their bones back.

The torches on the corridor walls turn on and off.

“Neeeeat. Do that again!” 19441’s eyes bulge.

They turn off again, and then light up. First those nearest to 19441, and then those further and further down the hall. Then they all hiss out before repeating the pattern.

“I feel like this means something...” mumbles 19441 out loud, “Turn on and off twice if you’re angry I broke your skeleton!”

“GO THAT WAY!” an irritated voice echoes through the house, followed by all nearby torches turning off and only a pair in the distance remaining.

“Huh,” 19441 shrugs. A clear order, “See? Wasn’t that hard, but I liked the shinies too.”

With its route clear, 19441 follows the lights through a hallway that’s much longer than the house looked on the outside, until it ends up in a cavernous room with a short set of stairs leading down to a train of carts set on a rail leading into some sort of a tunnel.

“GET IN!” booms the voice.

“No can do,” 19441 shakes its head, “See?” it points at a wooden pole sporting a hoof-shaped sign reading ‘You must be at least this tall to ride’. Said sign is still roughly one head height over 19441, even if the drone tiphoofs.

“WHAT?!”

“I know you probably don’t have eyes, being all voice-y and not much else, but there’s a sign here saying I can’t get on.”

“IT’S JUST A PIECE OF WOOD!”

“That says I can’t get on...” 19441 shakes its head, “You can’t just disobey the rules. A high rank will come and eat you.”

“YOU CAN FLY OVER IT!”

“If you cheat, a high rank will come and eat you.”

“THIS HOUSE BELONGS TO ME AND I SAY YOU CAN GET ON.”

“Eeeeh,” 19441 scratches its head hesitantly, “I knew drones who started hearing voices from the hive mind that told them to do bad things. A high rank came and ate them. Poor 77985 only started talking funny and called itself a queen once ... and boom! Munched.”

“GRAAAWRGH!”

The ground shakes once and the stone floor shatters directly under the sign which slides down into the newly opened crack. 19441 examines the signs now roughly at its head height.

“Hmmmm. Close, buuut can you make it scooch a bit more? Just to be saf-”

A rumbling boom echoes through the room, followed by a bolt of lightning ripping the ceiling open, turning the wooden pole to ash, and leaving the charred sign lying on the floor.

“GO!”

“I guess that one’s on you, voice,” 19441 frowns before shrugging and walking up to the train of small carts. It sits down into the cart at the front, and as soon as it does so a metal bar in the front swoops down like a mouse trap. It would probably crush an adult pony’s ribcage, but a drone is small enough for it to snugly fit into the seat and to put its forelegs over the bar before looking around expectantly, “What now, voice?”

With an initial lurch, the train of carts starts moving along the rails.

“NOW YOU DIE!” the voice bursts into laughter.

“Hey. that’s not nice!” 19441 frowns, “Now you sound like a high r-whoa?!”

The skeleton of a hanged pony drops from the ceiling. 19441 tries to grab its leg, but misses.

“Awww...”

A dead pony bursts out of the wall to the side, not entirely skeletal this time. Its eyes blank and its hooves sharpened into deadly hooks.

“Woo! Almost got me!” 19441 laughs, reaching out to slap the pony’s hoof and forgetting how it ended last time, “Oh goop...”

With a crack, the surprisingly light pony corpse now remains hanging by 19441’s foreleg hook and being dragged forward by the train.

Some violent shaking later, the zombie pony falls off and its body gets sucked under the carts. With a tremor passing through the entire train, the ride grinds to a halt. 19441 looks around but nothing seems to be moving.

“I’m gonna be in so much trouble for this...” it sighs, “I knew the sign was right. Never ever disobey-”

Something cracks and clangs in the back of the train, making the drone immediately turn its head. An earth pony doll, not even half the size of 19441, is crawling over the carts in the back, its pitch black eyes locked on the changeling. In its mouth, it’s carrying a big and sharp kitchen knife stained with dry blood.

“Hey, you’re even smaller than me!” 19441 tilts its head, “I’ve never seen that before.”

The murder doll is approaching, its blank stare still locked on the drone while it makes jerky stabbing and slashing motions with the knife in its mouth.

“IMMOBILIZED AND HELPLESS,” booms the voice.

“Hmm, what?” 19441 stands up freely and waves around a chunk of the metal bar previously holding it down that it *dug* off with its forelegs and stuck into a cup holder for easier use, “Sorry, I was a bit stuck and wanted to take a better look at the tiny pony.”

As the drone faces the doll, the doll lunges at it, barely making the jump with its stubby legs. 19441 catches it with its outstretched forelegs and

watches it try to slash the drone with the knife, barely even reaching its chest and, when it does, it harmlessly slides off of the chitin.

“Hee hee, you’re so tiny and you’re made from the same brown surface thingy as sticks are!” 19441 hooks the knife out of the doll’s mouth and puts its handle through its leg hole, “See? This is how you hold it for more reach,” it jabs the air to demonstrate.

Disarmed, the doll starts attempting to crawl across 19441’s forelegs towards it.

“Awww!” the drone pulls the doll into a hug in response, “I’m gonna take you home with me, tiny, but we gotta disguise you first,” 19441 puts the doll on its back where it starts trying to choke the drone while biting down on its carapace with absolutely no effect.

19441 looks up.

“Hey, voice! Is this ride thingy over?”

Nothing.

“Huh, I guess so,” 19441 raises its voice, adding, “IT WAS A BIT SHORT BUT I STILL HAD FUN!” it hops off of the cart and keeps going through the tunnel until it finds a random door and walks in.

The new room is clean and neat, filled with workbenches and various tools lining the walls. The hive mind pops out a tooltip: *Workshop*.

“Hey, tiny!” 19441 raises its voice just to be sure the doll currently punching it in the back of its head can hear it, “Since you’re made of soft brown, you won’t be leaking, right? So, I was thinking, we need to make holes in those to make sure others believe you’re a changeling too. Next, we gotta paint you black. And once we fix your eyes you’re all set. That all black look is a good try, but we’re black all over with teal eyes, not just, well, black all over.”

The doll jumps onto the nearest workbench and runs towards the wall.

“You’re right. I’m gonna need some help with this. Hive mind, how are changelings made?”

Several moments filled with rather confusing, loud, and sweaty imagery involving orifices later, 19441 furrows its nonexistent brows in puzzlement. Next, it pokes its backside and underbelly.

“Umm, I think I’m missing the right bits for whatever that was.”

***BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!**

The doll targets 19441, a cordless, somehow turned on power drill held in its forelegs while it stumbles forward on its hind legs.

“What’s that, little buddy?” asks 19441, “Goes bzzz, the spinny things look pointy... gotcha! Tiny, you’re a genius!” 19441 grows griffon talons on its forelegs and easily pries the drill out of the doll’s weak grasp, “Now just hold still while we make you a proper changeling. You’re gonna *love* your new cupholders! I’ll even show you how to use your slashy better later.”

Wet 13887 is walking along a road, grumbling to itself.

“Stupid tunnel of love... got no love... not even a proper tunnel... water everywhere... holes not helping...”

“Heya, buddy!” it hears from behind. Seeing 10013 approaching with a smile does raise its spirits a bit, “You look wet.”

“I am,” 13887 nods, “I woke up near something called a tunnel of love, but it lied. Plus, some voices kept yelling something about fear of drowning and didn’t take ‘Yeah, I know!’ for an answer.”

“Yeeeah, this place isn’t as fun as it looks. How about we go find the others and get out?”

“I’m all for it, but where *is* out?”

“Let’s regroup and see if anyone else knows.”

“Good idea!”

“GUUUUUUUUUUYS!” yells a happy voice from a side road accompanied by the thudding of small hooves,
“Guysguysguysguysguysguysguys!”

“Heya, 19441!” 13887 greets the galloping drone filled to the brim with excitement.

“Look look look look!” 19441 brakes, sending the gravel from the road flying in all directions before taking what looks like a trembling changeling doll with eyes covered with globs of goop off of its back, “I found tiny in a haunted house and it can totally move on its own and we’ll take it home but first I had to make it look like us.”

“Wow, you even got that horrified expression right,” 10013 nods with a smirk.

“Huh,” 19441 purses its lips, “I don’t think it was like that at first. Oh well, I think tiny is just nervous around new changelings,” it puts the murder doll back behind its neck, “Anyway, so I had to use a buzzer to drill holes in its legs, which went fine, and then there was a barrel of black stuff called tar that I thought had something to do with stars because, like, night is black, so I dipped tiny in it, and then I realized I forgot to make holes in the back legs, but when I started drilling more, tiny kinda... caught on fire. I found an another barrel with what *looked* like water but smelled suuuper sharp-”

10013 clears its throat before pointing behind the drone talking like a machine gun.

“19441, what’s that?” it asks, looking at an orange corona visible over the amusement park buildings and attractions.

19441 scratches its head.

“Well, I was getting to that. You see, when I threw tiny into the not-water, it kinda went... whoosh.”

“Whoosh...”

“Yep, blue fire and all. Exactly like all the torches in the haunted house. Everywhere! So I pulled tiny out and ran. Thankfully, there were some tubs with real water nearby in which I doused tiny, and I even ate something called a bob. Crunchy and fizzy but too big to fit into a cup holder.”

“Bob?”

“Yeah, the whole place was called apple bob something,” 19441 keeps going, clearly not distracted by the orange corona getting brighter, “And I had nothing to recolor tiny’s eyes, so I gooped all over them like we do for healing, and-” it grabs the doll again and raises it up with both forelegs, “Ta-daa! Tiny’s a changeling!”

Inside the arcade security booth, 31214 bites its lip. Everything looked so easy at first! It closed the doors to be safe, it made funny noises to keep the big, shuffling, broken ponies away, then the green bar made of more bars turned yellow, and eventually red.

As it’s now watching the penultimate red bar disappear, leaving only the final, shortest one on the long screen, 31214 realizes that somewhere along the line it made a mistake.

“Okay. okay. okay,” it mutters, “Clicking the clickers worked for some time, but now there are a bunch of shufflers and the more I use the noisemakers the faster those bars disappear. And the longer this takes, the more it looks like the shufflers are homing in on this place,” it walks over to the left door just as something slams loudly against it, “I don’t think I’ve got a button for this.”

It starts pacing back and forth. Despite the disappearing bars’ length, they all lasted about the same amount of time, which means 31214 still has...

two minutes before it disappears and, potentially, both doors open and let in the shufflers.

It looks upwards at a grate in the ceiling.

Maybe I could take the ventilation shaft? The spinny thing inside doesn't look too dangerous.

SLAM!

The door shakes with another blow.

“Okay, I give up, black box. If you wanted me to do things per instructions, you should have talked slower,” 31214 sticks its tongue at the control panel and blows a raspberry, “Time to do it the drone way.”

Two minutes later, both doors are completely glued to the frames with copious amounts of goo. A final beep comes from the panel, the last bar disappears, and all lights turn off. The final bit doesn't exactly bother 31214, though.

The doors hiss... and stay stuck.

The screens on the wall go dark.

The spinny thing in the ceiling vent stops moving.

The air starts getting heavier and warmer.

Something starts crawling and scraping through the ceiling vent.

Closer and closer.

The fan gets pushed against the grate and behind it there are two glowing red eyes belonging to something alicorn-sized trying to bite its way through.

31214 scoots under the control panel as, with the screeching and grinding of bending metal, the thing lands on the floor.

Clop *Shuffle* *Clop* *Shuffle*

Four legs of broken metal, twisted springs, and rotting faux-coat stop where 31214 sat in the chair moments before.

A green flash brightens the dark room, followed by a quick “Eep!” as 47989 lands in front of 31214. In the next moment, the horrifying mechanical facsimile of an alicorn crumbles on the floor, its barrel completely scooped out.

“What are you doing here?” whispers 31214.

“That pony thingy brought me,” 47989 nods to the motionless machine, “I nodded off and woke up when it was pushing through the vent. It was super loud...”

31214 focuses, sensing hive links nearby.

“There’s more of us coming our way,” it points at the back wall of the security room, “And I don’t think I like this place now that the beepers and clickers don’t work anymore.”

“It’s kinda hot and hard to breathe too, but the vent was worse,” 47989 nods, walking over to the back wall, “This way, you said? My noggin still feels all dull.”

“Yup,” 31214 nods.

Only a few seconds later, the two drones dig through the outside wall of the arcade and take a breath of fresh air.

Correction - hot air filled with the smell of ash.

Three black blurs rush past them, yelling from the top of their lungs.

“FOLLOW US, YOU TWO!” orders 10013.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH! WHERE’S THE TUNNEL OF LOVE WHEN YOU NEED ONE!”

“HOLD ON, TINY! HOLD OOOOOON!”

31214’s brain needs some time to process the raging inferno closing in on them from the direction the others were fleeing.

47989’s brain is still in recovery, so its legs take charge and order immediate evacuation.

“I can’t believe it,” 31214 breathes out while galloping to catch up, “We’re running away from the biggest shiny ever.”

“WHAT HAVE WE BECOME?!”

“WE LIVE, BUT AT WHAT COST?”

And finally, they all reach the tunnel of love filled with wooden debris.

“Close your leg holes AND JUMP!” yells 10013, diving into the lazy river.

“TUNNEL OF LIES, I SAY! TUNNEL OF LIES!”

“HOW CAN ONE BE A TRUE CHANGELING WITHOUT CUP HOLDERS?!”

“STOP YELLING MY HEAD HURTS-OW OW OW OW!”

“NOOOO, TINYYYYYYY!”

And so, the five drones remain bobbing up and down in the lazy river, clinging to the remains of swan-like love boats, while the world burns around them on all sides.

Again...

Author's Notes:

Why does it keep happening?!

CH: 11/13 - Haze

“We’re here,” Chrysalis breathes out. The trip from the north took a long time, but due to the old royal palace of the Great Changeling Empire being at the southeastern edge of the Everfree Forest, it wasn’t so much longer than simply crossing the Everfree itself from west to east while also avoiding the vast majority of threats.

The ruins reclaimed by nature long ago open into what used to be the palace plaza, although neither 96 nor 68 would have any idea about it. One by one, Chrysalis’ mind latches onto hive link after hive link, immediately establishing connections and instinctively scanning for any pressing issues.

That’s the natural power of changeling queens. We can be stronger than a warrior if we focus our life on it or we can be better than any infiltrator, but for them it’s on an instinctive level. Our inherent power is... ugh... management.

The designated place where survivors were supposed to gather hosts, according to Chrysalis’ mind, roughly two hundred changelings. Judging from the strength of some hive links, the number will keep on dropping no matter what anyone does.

There are no corpses anywhere. If anyone died after arriving here, their body was eaten for any scraps of love left.

“Show yourselves,” says Chrysalis quietly, standing under a crumbling, wide staircase leading to what used to be the majestic palace itself. She doesn’t need to shout, because she knows everyone present will hear her voice in their mind.

The hive links approach and, slowly, 43 walks out of the palace first, quickly followed by more and more withered, battered, and overall wretched remains of her hive.

You don't know why I sent you here. You don't know why you're still alive. All you had to do to survive was get here. You trusted your Queen, and your Queen will do what she can to reward you for it.

Chrysalis, 43, 68, 96, the only four changelings remaining from the top hundred.

“Only warriors and infiltrators,” Chrysalis looks up at the small crowd slowly trickling onto the stairs, “Funny. Right now I need drones or Silents.”

43 looks to the left at a pile of rubble next to the palace. Slowly, twenty four small heads peek out from behind various pieces of masonry, all dented, scratched, cracked, or downright missing ears, eyes, fins, or even their stubby horns.

As painful as the sight is, it makes absolute sense that the drones would have the lowest survival rate, both in regards to the long drop and the following environmental threats. Unfortunately, it also makes perfect sense why the warriors and infiltrators hid in the remains of the palace while having the drones stay outside. One - they simply don't care, most of them. Two - 43 is a warrior. He wouldn't be able to prevent a hungry infiltrator from draining a drone in the shadows. Three - any enemy would see the drones first which would allow the rest to react.

“Which one of you is in charge?” asks Chrysalis.

“I am, Your Majesty,” says 43.

“I didn't ask you, 43,” Chrysalis keeps looking at the drones, “I know you little twerps always have someone who's doing the thinking for your group. Which one is it?”

A drone limps forward from behind a broken chunk of a pillar.

“Umm, me, Your Majesty,” says the drone weakly. It's not even nervous. It knows it can't change anything that's about to happen.

“44986,” says Chrysalis, “How many of you can work?”

44986 stumbles backwards.

“E-Everyone, Your Majesty!”

Without prompting, the drones start limping, stumbling, and in several cases even crawling out of their hiding places. Chrysalis looks at one missing both hind legs slowly dragging itself towards her.

“Oh really?” she narrows her eyes.

44986 looks nervously at the obviously completely crippled drone.

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! 99685 can totally still dig. You just need forelegs for that-” it freezes when Chrysalis quietly *growls*.

She measures everyone’s wounds... and counts the remaining limbs. The drone-to-limb ratio... *isn’t great*.

“44986, find me six drones who are the most capable of working right now. Excluding you.”

The drone instinctively blurts out six numbers before it even realizes that it could mean dooming everyone else. Drones are replaceable. Chrysalis taps into their minds, showing them two locations where to dig and how deep.

“Reserve stores of love crystals. Dig them all up, bring them to the throne room.”

The drones hobble off.

“Now show me the five *weakest*,” Chrysalis adds.

44986 hangs its head.

“I am *waiting!*” Chrysalis growls again.

With a sigh, 44986 slowly approaches five drones, patting each one on the back or the head as they slump down. In the case of 99685, it simply flops on its belly, resigned to its fate. It knew. They all knew all along.

“These five,” mumbles 44986.

Chrysalis grabs 44986’s chin with one hoof and forces it to look her in the eyes.

“Not an easy task, was it?” she hisses, lets go, and starts walking up the stairs to 43, “Assign someone to carry the ones who can’t walk to the throne room. Everyone else, get inside,” when the drones don’t move, she flashes them an irritated glare, “As far as I can see, all of you still have at least one ear and a working link, so I know you heard me.”

The drones exchange glances and start shuffling ahead.

When inside, Chrysalis focuses on her own mind, scouting for a way to dive deeper into the inherited memories, but feels her touch repelled by power far beyond her own.

“Call me when you are truly ready. I’m not sure what will happen when I’m gone,” replies an old voice she heard once before.

Several hours later, everyone is inside the throne room, huddling under any cover they could find. Glowing love crystals are bathing the area in green shimmer, and the vast majority of the changelings are asleep. The few in a good shape were sent out in infiltrator-warrior pairs to bring any resources the forest can provide from which to craft suitable sutures, splints, ropes, and any other vaguely medical necessities usable on broken chitin.

So far, everyone is still alive.

Getting back to the hive will be a chore, but this outpost will serve as a temporary base more than well. And who knows? There might be more

survivors coming, although this long after the... failed invasion it's unlikely.

Chrysalis measures everyone's links one last time before mentally touching her new top brass.

"43, 68, 96, meet me here," she pings a place under the palace.

The place is a small cell, likely one for solitary confinement, and as the three warriors arrive, she walks inside and starts fixing the rusty door with her goo.

"What's going on, Your Majesty?" asks 43.

"I'm going for what might be my final dive into the hive mind. 68 and 96 will tell you all you need to know," replies Chrysalis, cutting off all her hive links which makes the warriors blink in shock.

"Shouldn't it wait until we gather enough love to make you stronger?" asks 68, earning a shocked look from 43 like anyone second-guessing the Queen would, "Your previous dives were exhausting."

Chrysalis shakes her head.

"Close that dropped jaw, 43, before a fly buzzes in," she says, "I fully intend to burn myself out making sure I... or anything else that might want to get out of here can't."

"Anything else that-?" 43 tilts his head.

"68, slap him."

68 does so.

"Her Majesty told us to brief you later and we will do so," says 68 firmly, "Please, keep going, Your Majesty."

"Thank you," Chrysalis nods, "I will reinforce this cell and the cocoon I will be making. 68 and 96 will stay down here both to protect me from

anyone and anything hostile as well as to protect you in case that I... fail. If I prepare things properly, you might be strong enough.”

“What about the hive?” asks 43.

“You’ll be in charge. If you have any doubts about the right call, come here and discuss it with these two,” Chrysalis nods to her bodyguards, “You don’t have to grow our numbers, you don’t have to defend any of our positions. Your job is simply to make sure everyone up there in the throne room survives, no matter the class or rank. 68, 96, you two will keep an eye on things. If there are any split decisions while I’m gone, a two-vote majority wins. Is that clear?”

The warriors nod as one.

“How long do you think you’ll be gone, Your Majesty?” asks 43.

“If all things go well, it might only be a few hours,” Chrysalis frowns as all three of them breathe a sigh of relief, “I’m preparing everything for the worst case scenario. Just in case. If anything tries to get out of here that isn’t *one hundred percent* me, it must die no matter what.”

The door is mostly green and hard as steel as Chrysalis closes it. Through the small, barred window at the top third, the warriors can see her begin building a cocoon around herself.

In mere minutes, Chrysalis’ mind is gone, separated from the outside by the hardening green resin. 96 takes the first watch while 68 leaves with 43, telling him everything Chrysalis explained to them about her inherited memories and the danger lurking within.

Like before, Chrysalis is pulled into the memories without having the option to prepare herself in the hive mind’s waiting room. This time, instead of floating above the sea, she finds herself in a lush valley surrounded on all sides by forests. The valley is full of ruins from structures made from huge slabs of stones which are overgrown with vegetation. A stone path cuts

through the valley, leading on one side into the forests and towards a towering pyramid with a flat top on the other. One more look around reveals changelings - tiny flecks of teal light dotting the ruins, all aimed towards the pyramid, all filled with uncertainty and worry. The weird thing is that no matter how hard Chrysalis tries, she can't distinguish between them. No warriors, drones, infiltrators, or anything else... just *changelings*.

The memory doesn't wait for anyone, so Chrysalis stops examining the changelings and flies over to the main pyramid where, as it turns out, a royal changeling is locked in a heated battle against a second royal as well as several other changelings who look like the hive's top ranks.

Clearly, a queen and her top guards are fighting for their life against the challenger. The one fighting alone against the entire old guard is a marvelous changeling specimen brimming with power and beauty that makes Chrysalis self-conscious on far too many uncomfortable levels.

A touch of knowledge reveals to Chrysalis that this is a battle between queen Shroud and her daughter Haze, and no matter the relation, the visual difference between the two couldn't be bigger. Where Shroud's carapace is dusty grey, mane and tail white, and eyes gleaming silver, Haze's body is dark green, eyes glowing with sapphire blue, and her hair scheme of living fire of red and orange sharply contrasts with the overall dim look of Shroud.

However, as Chrysalis floats closer, unbothered by the battle, she notices that the colors are completely misleading. Haze's colors might be warm and lively like a burst of sparks after throwing another piece of wood on a campfire, but her blue eyes are precise and calculating, carefully measuring her every step as she defends herself from weapons and energy blasts of all the other changelings. Shroud's wintery scheme breaks completely as Chrysalis focuses more on her as well, and the living queen shivers.

Anger.

Pure, living *rage*.

At that moment, Chrysalis knows with absolute certainty she just found what she was looking for all this time. Unfortunately, Chrysalis' ego isn't

overblown enough, no matter what anyone might say, to consider even for a moment that she could face either of the two queens without getting immediately splattered.

Obeying a mental order, the top ranks back off for a second before attacking Haze from all sides at once. Gaining a moment to focus, Shroud's horn flares with a sickly green glow, and a telekinetic blast *shears* a layer of stones off of the top of the pyramid. When the cloud of rocks ground into dust under a single moment of telekinetic pressure clears up, Chrysalis' jaw drops.

Haze is standing there, her horn burning with magical fire creating protective barriers around her as well as every single changeling attacking her. Runic symbols floating in the air slowly dissipate as the top ranks exchange confused glances.

Chrysalis shakes her head.

Magic. Real magic. The ability to use it is so extremely rare and limited among changelings. Even I can use minor enchantments at best, and they're temporary and barely controllable.

Shroud rears on her hind legs and screams. She doesn't scream something, she just lets out a howl of pure anger alongside a psychic blast that even Chrysalis, despite not being part of this memory, feels. Chrysalis recoils and tries to blink away the sudden migraine and blurred vision.

When she recovers, Shroud is sitting on the pyramid's top, her legs having collapsed under her, while Haze is still standing, surrounded by now dead top-ranked changelings, each bleeding from ears, eyes, and mouth. Haze herself simply sneezes out some blood out of her nostrils, and walks over to Shroud.

"This can't be our future," she says simply while nodding towards the corpses, "We must build a brighter one."

"We must carve it out of the corpses of our enslavers!" snarls Shroud, "Or we will *never* be free!"

“Why are you talking about fighting? Ever since you killed your father, we’ve only been running. Look where you brought us!” Haze waves her hoof around, “There’s nothing to eat. We are what we are now, we can’t hide and wait. We *need* ponies, or griffons, or any other living, *loving* species.”

“We *can* wait. We can hide and we can strike once they all forget us,” Shroud pushes herself up on shaking legs to face Haze eye-to-eye, “They wanted an unstoppable army to save them and my cursed father gave it to them. And when we did what we were made to, they tossed us away! THEY WERE HAPPY WHEN WE WERE STARVING AND DYING OFF! WHERE WAS YOUR LOVE THEN, HUH?! WE HAD NOTHING!”

“Mother,” Haze breathes out, a bitter smile appearing on her face, “I’m so sorry it ended like th-”

She looks down where a spike growing out of Shroud’s foreleg would have pierced her armor and impaled her heart were it not for the fact that it shattered on impact.

“I am the only queen who can ensure we will never be slaves again!” Shroud bares her fangs and snaps at her daughter like a rabid dog.

Haze’s horn flashes, and after a short burst of flames there’s nothing left of the old queen barring a small pile of ash.

“Hmph,” huffs a voice just next to Chrysalis’ ear, making the queen dart to the side and face an older version of Haze. Seeing that, Haze smirks, “Jumpy, are we?”

“I’m not risking anything,” replies Chrysalis, lowering herself into a careful combat stance.

“Understandable,” Haze nods, unfazed, “There’s one more thing I want to show you before we get to business, though.”

The memory of the valley shifts into one where current Haze is stroking the mane of young Shadow as the smaller royal is hugging Haze’s neck.

“Don’t worry, buggy,” whispers Haze, “We both have our roles to play, and you’ll do great.”

“It’s too soon...” whimpers Shadow.

“It is. I wish we had more time,” Haze nods, “But we can’t always control our circumstances. All we can do is look and plan ahead.”

“But I don’t know what to do! Where do I even start?”

“You will be the new queen. Most of them will accept it. Some will challenge you, but you are strong enough and you will grow so much stronger with time. I wish there was some secret I could tell you to make this easier, but the only thing to know is that you must do it. We both must do it if our species is to survive. We don’t have a choice.”

Shadow pulls away from the hug just so that she can give her mother a kiss on her nose. Haze smiles, her horn lights up, and her love starts pouring into Shadow. Soon, Haze’s body crumbles to dust as Shadow devours every scrap of love there is.

Chrysalis looks away from the scene and at Haze watching it with a dreamy smile.

“Fine, I admit this was more for me than for you,” she turns towards Chrysalis when the memory fades, and sighs, “I guess now it’s time to get to business.”

Everything goes dark.

The hive mind’s waiting room is different. How? Chrysalis can’t tell, but something is making her hair stand on edge and her chitin crawl. As Haze materializes in front of her, Chrysalis gives her a nod of respect.

“So, here we are, Chrysalis. The end of the known road.”

“What happens now?” asks Chrysalis.

“If you decided to seek me out, then I presume you’ve made steps in case of trouble.”

“I have next to no love inside me. From what Shadow said, you were the strongest changeling who ever lived, so no matter what I would find here, with zero love I would drag it down to my level.”

“Smart thinking,” Haze nods, “And if you lose, there’s someone filled with love waiting out there to skewer you- well, *her*.”

“Exactly.”

“Unfortunately, they will fail.”

“What?” Chrysalis frowns.

“If you fail, they will fail,” Haze leans closer, “I am not your enemy, but I know how *different* my mother is. If she gets out, she will control them no matter how exhausted she might be.”

“How do you know that?”

Haze closes her eyes and sits down.

“Because of this,” the darkness of the hive mind withdraws, revealing that the two are in the eye of the storm of ash surrounding them. Screaming and wailing at the edge of her hearing makes Chrysalis turn her head from side to side to face the unseen attacker who nonetheless doesn’t strike. Haze looks at Chrysalis, “What I didn’t have time to show you was *why* I had to die and leave Shadow in charge prematurely. Sit down, Chrysalis, and listen. Use the time I’m giving you to get used to her rage creeping through the cracks before you have to face it in full force.”

Chrysalis does so despite every instinct of her body telling her to keep looking around for something that can strike from any angle, at any time, with any amount of force.

“Is all this... Shroud’s doing?” she asks.

Haze nods.

“Yes, it is. When I killed her, she left her physical body and retreated into the hive mind. I didn’t realize it until it was too late. We started forgetting what happened before I became a queen. A detail here, a memory there, and with all the trouble ahead of us we simply didn’t notice it until it was too late. When I finally realized what was wrong and tried to stitch together whatever knowledge remained within the hive mind, changelings started acting up, violently attacking and devouring others in a hunt for power. And whenever I tried to track what made it happen, I lost another memory, another piece of our history. My only recourse against this was to fully enter the hive mind myself.”

“And that meant sacrificing a physical body at a time when the hive needed a living queen. How could Shroud have done that if you were so much more powerful than her?” asks Chrysalis.

“Power comes in many forms, and I believe this has something to do with our lost history. I can only remember my own experiences with her, and I know Shroud’s mind was different from almost everyone else’s. She couldn’t directly manipulate someone like me or Shadow, but she could hide away in the hive mind in ways I couldn’t track.”

“You said *almost everyone*,” Chrysalis raises an eyebrow.

“As the disintegration progressed, I noticed strange hive links, and when I tried to connect to them, I was... misdirected. It’s difficult to explain, but one moment I was following a link and the next instant I was inside a ‘random changeling number XXX, nothing to see here’. Someone knew what Shroud was doing and was better equipped to deal with it than I was. Unfortunately, Shroud went after those first. Since I was still learning her methods of manipulating the hive mind I was unable to save many of them but I protected some. Over time, I weaved and weaved my net until Shroud could barely reach out, but I could never stop her completely.”

“Any idea who or what those fake hive links were? I think I’ve sensed a few myself but, just like with you, they kind of... slipped into unimportance as soon as I touched them,” Chrysalis furrows her brows.

“I’ve had time to watch and ponder it, and I think they are old changelings whom Shroud wasn’t able to kill. Those who might still remember bits and pieces of what we used to be.”

Chrysalis sighs.

“So you don’t know why she called us army and slaves.”

Haze shakes her head.

“Changeling history, as stored in the hive mind, begins with me. However,” she hesitates, “Shroud is bound to know. Whether or not she’ll tell you anything is a different story entirely. I worry...” her voice trails off. For the first time, Haze seems hesitant.

“That I will lose?” Chrysalis takes a guess, “That’s always been an option. Just like you, I don’t have much of a choice.”

“No,” Haze shakes her head, “I worry that you might think she’s right.”

Chrysalis ponders it for a moment.

“I mean, since don’t know why she-”

“NO!” Haze raises her voice, “Look, I don’t know why she’s doing all this,” she gestures towards the ashen tornado surrounding them, “I can’t remember our history from before me, but there’s *zero* doubt in my mind about this,” she leans so close to Chrysalis that their noses almost touch, “She. Is. Wrong.”

Chrysalis gently pushes Haze’s face away.

“We will see.”

Haze hangs her head.

“If she wins, the hive ends,” she says quietly, “Some changelings might escape on their own and live among ponies, but there won’t be a *hive*. The cycle of hiding, attacking, and getting beaten down will repeat until we

either win or get eradicated completely. And if we win by force... well, you saw the times we tried to farm other living creatures in cocoons, and it always failed because the love we gained from it got weaker and weaker over time. It's the paradox of our nature, Chrysalis. If we win, we lose."

"And if we lose, we lose," Chrysalis scowls, "Then how do we win? Where is the path? Shroud's way of domination dooms us, your way of coexistence leaves us starving and resented because we are 'mind-controlling bug monsters'. *How do we win?!'*"

There's nothing other than bitter aftertaste in Chrysalis' mouth when Haze replies:

"You are the current queen, Chrysalis, and unlike those before you you had the opportunity to see parts of our history and how they played out. Other queens, when they looked too deep into the hive mind, found it staring back with eyes burning with rage. The explosion that separated you from the real core of the hive mind might have been the best thing that ever happened to us as a species, if you use your freedom right. The real hive mind revenants deemed you useless and they moved into a different host. If you're lucky, their host is dead and they're finally gone. If not, they will find and control changelings in order to destroy you. However, that is all secondary, until you clear your head up. As depressively comical it would be to have *two* Shrouds running around attempting genocide, I'd rather avoid that."

"Hmmm..." is the only noise Chrysalis makes.

Haze slowly breathes out.

"Well, I guess my vigil is at its end. You seem to be holding up well against Shroud's pressure. In the meantime, is there anything you want to know that *isn't* related to my mother?"

"I won't beat around the bush - is Scream trustworthy?"

"She *did* help me immensely. As we were returning to Equestria, I had no knowledge about the state of the world. Thanks to her scouting I was able to plan my steps."

“So... help with no strings attached?”

“I suppose so,” Haze shrugs, “Of course, from what I was able to see after my passing, she knows how to play the long game.”

“That she does,” Chrysalis grumbles before clapping her hooves together, “One thing, hopefully a less depressing one - what was that instant kill move you used when you took control of me to destroy Carapace?”

Haze looks up with a fresh, amused smirk.

“It’s an ability I genetically locked into drones after one of the queens who came after me started splitting us into classes which the hive needed at the time.”

“Drones? Why give something this incredibly useful to *drones* of all changelings?! Warriors and infiltrators would-”

“Make us a tide of murder machines unstoppable by any armor, fortification, and barely any magic,” Haze tilts her head.

“And if we win we lose...” Chrysalis sighs.

“Besides, I think drones need it the most for all that digging with next to no access to love. We’ve had enough warmongers and predators in our history. We could use some culture, even if it’s about finding shiny things and trading them for anything that sounds interesting at the time.”

Slowly, the howling of the storm grows louder, which Chrysalis understands is Haze’s influence fading away.

“You know, I could use a queen like you remaining in the hive mind,” says Chrysalis.

Haze shakes her head.

“I had my role and I fulfilled it. The only way this ends well is with a fresh hive mind free of influences other than yours, and you must become a queen worthy of being ‘the first’.”

“It was worth a shot,” chuckles Chrysalis.

“Heh,” Haze closes her eyes, “Get ready, Chrysalis. The fate of our species is now entirely in your hooves.”

Haze vanishes, and with her goes the storm of ash, leaving Chrysalis in complete silence.

The queen looks around. Nothing but darkness.

She tries to reach out to any other hive link and fails. Good, the cocoon is working.

Finally, she concentrates on returning into her body and the real world...

...and fails.

“I don’t think so, Chrysalis,” muses Shroud’s raspy voice as the grey queen materializes in front of her, “You’ve gone far through the hive mind, protected by my traitorous father, but after I take control of your body I will finally destroy him for good, and everyone who ever used us will follow.”

Author's Notes:

Queue a boss fight track.

Or several, really, since next up is the finale of 1313's investigation.

You know what? Just find a Two Steps From Hell playlist or something, since we'll be polishing off the dreamscape too.

1313: 9

A quick crack of the wooden floor makes 1313 wake up immediately, instincts flaring up into full alert mode. Normally, his instincts wouldn't let him sleep after something like last night, but now he feels well rested and ready for anything.

"Hmm?" Zamira, her head on his chest and one foreleg draped over him, gives him a bleary look.

1313 catches the eye of the zebra bodyguard standing by the door who shifts her weight, causing another quiet creak, and moves a step to the left to avoid doing so again. With a sigh of relief, 1313 pulls Zamira into a hug.

"Sorry, still a bit on edge from yesterday," he whispers and traces the part of the now dim markings that's on her neck, "But this did wonders, I think."

"Heh," Zamira rolls off of him, "And to think most unicorns consider zebra shamanism just silly superstition. Show what they know about magic outside of dusty old books."

The zebra at the door clears her throat.

"Zamira?"

Zamira looks at the bedside clock showing half past nine and sits up.

"I guess it's time to get up then. Did anything happen throughout the night, Zaida?"

"This came for 'Blueblood'," Zaida replies, fishing out a scroll case from her saddlebag and putting it down on Blueblood's work desk while 1313 and Zamira are getting out of the bed, "Otherwise all clear."

Zamira examines the delivered case.

“High quality, no markings.”

“Well, open it,” 1313 nods at her.

Zamira unscrews the top of the case, shakes out a rolled-up envelope on the table, opens it, and once she reads the first few words of the note inside, she breathes out:

“Oh fuuuuck...”

1313 walks over and freezes as he’s seen this envelope before. Namely, in Stable Fade’s apartment.

“I *knew* someone followed us home last night. I thought I was just freaking out, but...” he lets the sentence hang.

“Did anypony see who brought it?” Zamira shoots at Zaida who shakes her head, “Crap,” she turns her head back towards 1313, “So, smart guy, how do we deal with this?”

1313 glances sideways at Zaida who raises an eyebrow. Zamira catches the look and adds:

“She knows what happened and who you are.”

1313 nods and taps his hoof against the carpet before walking over to the envelope and pulling out a note it contains.

“Keep an eye out on anything unusual,” he says, “I don’t want a repeat of last night.”

“Got it, no sharing bed anymore,” Zamira snickers while assuming a position across the room from Zaida so that the two cover each other’s blind spots.

1313 sticks his tongue out at her and starts to read out loud:

To anypony who finds this, I can’t do this anymore. I read the newspapers. I know that ponies started going crazy and killed themselves. I saw young

Torchlight do the same. I mean, I found his body in his room lying on the carpet in a pool of blood. He slit his fetlocks. I got a day off and...

When I came to work the next day... Master Torchlight greeted me but it couldn't have been him. They all keep telling me I didn't see what I saw, that it was just a trauma caused by changelings who broke into the estate and messed with my head, but I know what is real. I tried to talk to Feather Duster and the others, but they all just kept saying it was the changelings. I almost believed them but then I started waking up multiple times a night, hearing things, and one time I saw Serving Grace standing over my bed, just staring. When I reached for the lamp, she just smiled, and when I pushed the button she was gone.

I haven't slept for a week and I know I see the shadows move. I can hear them chuckle. I'm afraid that if I go visit my family they'll find them too. I can't go on.

I'm sorry for being this selfish. I'm so sorry. I'm sor-

*“-the rest is illegible. She started crying,” finishes 1313 in a distant, controlled tone. With a sorrowful expression, he looks at the two zebras, “I’m sorry too. There’s more going on but it’s clear *our invasion* caused it,” he slumps before looking back up with fire in his eyes, “But they made a mistake in attacking us, whoever *they* are. If we just found her last night and nothing happened, I might have believed it was just trauma caused by changeling feeding, but it wasn’t. She knew what she saw and everyone else tried to gaslight her. We have to stop it no matter the cost,” he touches the explosive necklace around his neck, “And maybe I deserv-”*

“Keep your head clear,” Zamira firmly interrupts him, “We have to stop this.”

*“The question is *how*,” 1313 starts pacing back and forth, replaying last night's encounter in his head, “The only way we were able to escape was with your dreamcatcher and chanting. Not to be a buzzkill, but *if* we’re going straight into the enemy base I’m not sure it’ll be enough. The problem is that we don’t have time to prepare *and* if the knowledge of*

specifically our involvement has spread then if we arrive with a bunch of guards nothing might happen.”

Zamira walks over to the desk and examines Stable Fade’s suicide note.

“Do you think this is a challenge aimed at us?”

“I don’t see who else could have known about us and then got the scroll case here during the night,” 1313 frowns, “But the timing means that Torchlight was already dead when I met him during the paladin reserve training. I know squat about magic, but wouldn’t the paladins have caught on to something being off?”

Zamira shrugs.

“They didn’t detect *you*. I told you pinheads were overrated.”

“Hmmm...” 1313 ponders their options, “We have to come alone and we can assume we’ll be tracked once we leave the estate so we can’t have backup leave after us and lie in wait, but it seems we’re safe here inside the house. The more time we take to prepare, the more time *they* will have as well, and the only place we can do it in secret, potentially, is here. How many dreamcatchers can you comfortably fit around those thick thighs of yours?”

“We’d have to get proper, zebra-made ones, plus some other preparations,” Zamira taps her hoof against the table, “Zaida, mind running some errands for us? It might be dangerous.”

Getting all the items on Zamira’s list, unfortunately, took most of the day, and all preparations devoured what little time was left afterwards. They did ponder whether to put off visiting Torchlight until broad daylight, but in the same way it could be more dangerous, the litany of peaceful rest Zamira taught 1313 would be more effective at night as well... or effective at all. Of course, despite any potential of reinforcements being gone, Zamira still instructed Zaida to, in case of them not coming back by morning,

immediately start shaking the nearest Royal Guard and don't stop until they sent a unit to help.

So finally, with both of them covered in invisible shamanistic drawings half-remembered from Zamira's earlier days and equipped with a combination of powders supposed to do... probably something, the two find themselves standing before the gate leading to the garden surrounding Torchlight estate.

"So far so good," 1313, looking like Blueblood again, breathes out, staring at the mansion in the back, "The lights are on, I can see servants moving here and there, and there's complete absence of unstoppable undead monstrosities."

"I was thinking," Zamira frowns, "What if we're wrong? What if we go there, say that a maid killed herself, they just say -Oh, really? That is horrible!- and ask us to leave?"

"Then we go with the original plan and call Torchlight out on sending an assassin into the castle in an attempt to kill princess Luna's changeling friend, or did you forget that part?"

Zamira looks away, mumbling:

"Maybe..."

1313 pats her back.

"Can't blame you, with all that happened. Let's go," he pushes a button on a stone post next to the garden gate.

A moment later the gate buzzes and clicks. Without thinking, Zamira pushes it open while 1313 follows her into the gardens and along the paved path leading up to the mansion.

"You know," he says after a moment, "I don't know much about nobles but did any you ever met feel like the type to let someone who just rang a bell in without checking who they were?"

Zamira winces, not having thought of that.

“Uhh, magic... camera maybe?”

1313 chuckles darkly.

“Yeah, let’s go with that.”

The door to the estate is cracked open already, which makes the two exchange glances before entering. Once they’re inside, the door closes on its own. Experimentally, Zamira pushes the handle which results in nothing.

“I guess that settles that,” she whispers.

“Yep,” 1313 looks into the left hallway and at a servant passing a T-section at its end without giving them as much as a glance.

A large door directly ahead at the end of the hall cracks open, clearly inviting them. With no other real option, they head towards it and can’t help feeling as if the shadows cast by the occasional lit candle on the wall are dancing and reaching for them in a way completely inconsistent with the flame.

“Can you hear it?” whispers Zamira. When 1313 shakes his head, she adds, “Whispering. I can’t make anything out but it’s there whenever I-”

1313 stops, wraps his foreleg around her neck, and leans against her.

“It’s just in your head,” he whispers into her ear, “My hearing is better and I’m getting nothing. Whatever is causing it isn’t used to changelings.”

With a determined frown, 1313 pulls both wings of the dining room door open...

...and all that determination instantly drains from him.

The long banquet hall is filled with tables creaking under the weight of changeling body parts arranged on plates, green blood filling the

accompanying glasses. Changeling heads are impaled on candle holders, and there are entire bodies hanging from chandeliers.

Amidst all that, blank-eyed pony servants are walking around with plates on their back as if this was a ball full of guests.

“Welcome, welcome!” Torchlight greets them while standing up from a chair on a raised dais on the opposite side of the room. When he sees that the duo are still only standing there, he adds with a wide smile full of saw-like teeth, “Come in.”

The banquet hall doesn’t as much pull them inside as lengthen, making them suddenly stand on the other side of the door which closes behind them. They don’t need to test it to know it’s locked tight.

“So, obvious question,” 1313 narrows his eyes, quickly getting over the gore everywhere, “What are you and what have you got against changelings?”

“Yeah, you speciesist ass,” adds Zamira, if only to reassure herself she can still speak.

Torchlight laughs, his hoofsteps echoing as he walks towards them.

“You creatures wouldn’t understand what I am even if I told you, but the dreamkeeper calls us ‘Dreamweavers’. We are ancient, and all this,” Torchlight points at the changelings corpses and pieces, “is what these toys gathered for me, *bug*,” he nods towards the servants now standing around the room at attention, “My personal... dislike for your kind is quite new. You see-”

“NOW!” Zamira calls out, reaches for a pouch around her neck, ripping it off, and swinging with it as the glittering dust inside scatters over Torchlight and their immediate surroundings.

Torchlight smirks, and suddenly the previously invisible markings in Zamira’s and 1313’s coats burst with bright silver light which freezes all the servants completely, a faint glimmer of rime appearing all over their bodies.

“Interesting ‘protection’,” he sneers, “but pointless nonetheless.”

A mix of hooves, talons, and claws burst out of the floor, grabbing 1313’s hooves as Zamira charges forward, pulling out a dreamcatcher which catches on blue fire and gets incinerated even before she can say the first words of the litany.

1313 strains in vain against the limbs holding him as Torchlight punts Zamira away with a simple swing of his foreleg. She slams into a pillar from which more limbs burst out and immobilize her.

“Even the best laid plans never survive first contact, do they? Aaanyway, where was I?” Torchlight’s smile grows wider, “Ah yes. You bugs are interesting, and cracking your mind will give me power over an entire new species. And I will *enjoy* doing so, especially after one of you stopped me from finally breaking the dreamkeeper herself! She was *my* prize and now the damned usurper has her. No matter, however, while the dreamkeeper might be out of my reach I now have your reality to feast upon.”

“I have *zero* idea what the hole you’re talking about,” growls 1313, “but if you think you’re in any way more terrifying than my queen or pretty much any changeling of higher rank than me you must be insane.”

“Not afraid of death, are we then?” asks Torchlight.

“Pretty much burned out on that one past the old survival instinct, yeah,” snarls 1313, “Any changeling would laugh at a threat like that.”

“Let’s see then,” darkness twists around Torchlight’s horn, a dark tendril bursts out of the ground and reaches into a swirling black portal appearing next to him. It pulls out a terrified servant mare by her neck, whom 1313 think he’s seen before work for Blueblood, “It wasn’t difficult to break into a pony around you once I figured out what you were,” he laughs, “And when I learned about that wonderful thing around your neck, all it took was to take control of a pony who knew how to trigger it.”

1313 suddenly becomes aware of the explosive necklace he’s gotten so accustomed to that he hasn’t even felt it most of the time anymore. He

glances at Zamira who isn't looking at him at all, rather at the servant with eyes wide open. To an infiltrator, her look says it all - Torchlight isn't lying and that servant knows how to blow 1313 up.

"Still not afraid," says 1313 with a sigh, "More annoyed, really, that after all the bullets I dodged it ends like this. To be honest, I think that if you spent a *week* in the hive as a low rank you'd be shitting your pants and *begging* for a straight up quick death. Besides," he smiles at Zamira who is finally looking his way, "I never expected Blueblood to let me go after all this, not for a moment," seeing her eyes tear up, he adds, "But I still had the best time of my life. I loved being with you, Zami."

She screams something unintelligible over the hoof in her mouth as 1313 stares Torchlight down.

"Whatever you are, monster, you won't get into a single changeling. We'll always be more afraid of each other than of anything then you can conjure."

"So be it," Torchlight frowns, giving 1313 at least this moral victory, "I still have the real world to toy with. Do it," the black tendril chokes the servant as it jerks her forward.

She raises her foreleg, drawing some sort of a symbol in the air, and says flatly:

"Gloom and doom, my problem goes boom."

Zamira screams again.

1313 tilts his head at the silliness of that all.

"That's so stu-"

The necklace around 1313's neck heats up, clicks, and everything goes white.

Author's Notes:

Nameless laughs in pure evil

1313:10

1313 tilts his head at the silliness of that all.

“That’s so stu-”

The necklace around 1313’s neck heats up, clicks, and everything goes white.

However, a flash of light is all that happens.

“-pid,” finishes 1313 through gritted teeth.

A second later, the necklace clicks again and drops on the floor, followed by a dark chuckle by a voice that’s faintly familiar only to 1313 but right now he can’t place it.

“The hole?” the infiltrator blinks.

“Mhmmh?” mumbles Zamira.

“What?” Torchlight glares at the servant whose eyes roll backwards as she collapses on the floor, “No, that *was* the right incantation and process.”

With a flash of emerald flames, 1313 is free as the limbs grasp in vain for his shapeshifted legs, in his changeling form, and rushing ahead as quickly as a changeling overloaded on love can.

Before anyone can react, he’s by Zamira’s pillar and bites off a limb holding her foreleg.

Another, and another.

“MHMMMMPH!” Zamira suddenly yells.

With a limb in his mouth, 1313 can’t react in time.

Crack!

The impact shakes 1313's whole body. Love or not, he's not a type of changeling built for durability. When his vision clears, he's lying spread-eagle on his back in a pool of blood. The love coursing through him allows 1313 to quickly close the cracks in his chitin and smooth out the horrifying dent in the side of his barrel, but at that point Torchlight's hoof lands on his chest and pushes down, cracking his freshly recovered armor.

"Come on, heal up again," Torchlight eases up on the pressure. Above him, the ceiling starts shattering, pieces of it flying upwards into a sky that's purple and red like a fresh bruise. Where the moon would be only hangs a bleeding eye of queen Chrysalis staring straight down at them, "I'll show you how *pleasant* it was when that damn bug stomped on me as I was almost through the rift."

1313 heals, just to buy time. He doesn't know what he's waiting for. Maybe Zamira will escape now that he bit off some of the limbs holding her. Maybe she has something else in her saddlebags. Maybe-

"AAAAARHHGGH-" he screams as Torchlight stomps straight down through his lung, his scream cutting off and turning into a gurgling wheeze.

The worst part is... that he can survive it. No one around his rank, even with love, would be able to heal damage this catastrophic without guidance from a high rank. Whoever his jigsaw genetics came from, though, definitely wasn't bound by that.

Torchlight steps off of him with a smirk.

"You might not fear death, bug, but I will teach you to fear pain."

As he raises his foreleg to stomp down on freshly healed 1313 again, a silver beam of bright moonlight falls on the two and, to the changeling's surprise, makes Torchlight back off with a furious growl.

Through the light, 1313 can see five shadows descend around the retreating "unicorn". 1313 pushes himself backwards before gasping in pain as he

stands up. Healing in his case doesn't exactly mean immediately getting rid of all effects of previous torture.

Bat ponies?

Three of the bat ponies wearing Nightguard armors look familiar, but 1313's first concern is Zamira now being crushed by the limbs sticking out of the pillar. He rushes towards her again and sees her sweat and her muscles bulge under the unreal strength of the nightmarish limbs. One more flash of green from his mouth later, he starts biting off the ones choking her first. They're tough and 1313, simply put, isn't. However, limb after limb eventually loosen their grip along with 1313's teeth breaking off and rehealing every time he has to take a second to put them back in.

When only the final few remain around her hind legs, Zamira can finally drop on all fours and free herself. Exhausted 1313 gives her a smile dripping with goo and resembling a train track. She looks at the teeth scattered on the floor.

"We'll gather those later," she gives him a peck on his nose which he appreciates despite it feeling like a knife running through his fragile muzzle before approaching the Nightguards and starting to recite the litany as the dreamcatcher-shaped marks over her body start glowing again.

Post-transformation, 1313 has no marks on him, so he starts gathering his teeth now just in case the Nightguards don't let him do it later.

Surrounded by Nightguards, each pointing a foreleg casting a brilliant beam of light at him, Torchlight grits his teeth.

"Bat ponies using magic," he growls, "Why didn't a single mind I know about ever show me this?"

"Some secrets don't leave the Nightguard," hisses Sharp Biscuit, "And some responsibilities can be bestowed only on the certain few."

Torchlight forces a laugh and, with a violent roar, takes a step towards Sharp who has to back off and grunt when faced with irresistible force.

“No matter,” Torchlight sees it and keeps pushing and pulling against the beams, “Your dreamkeeper isn’t here and you will run out of power soon enough. You. Can’t. Stop. Me!”

Like a rabid dog on chains, Torchlight suddenly lunges at Sharp and is stopped by the other four Nightguards changing positions behind Torchlight and pulling him back as hard as they can.

“We’re not here to stop you,” wheezes Sharp with a sudden bloodthirsty grin, “We are just a distraction.”

Torchlight looks around.

1313 looks around.

Zamira stops chanting and looks around.

Nothing happens. Something was *definitely* supposed to happen.

“You’re just bluff-” says Torchlight before being interrupted by Sharp.

“I SAID WE’RE JUST A DISTRACTION!” Sharp calls out loudly.

In response, a squeaky voice answers along with one final, smaller, beam of light shooting down from the sky:

“Comiiiiing! Sorry, sorry, sorry! These armor clips got stuck on my fins and the helmet is still a bit too big so I had to grab some cardboard and and goop-”

“No...” Torchlight’s eyes go wide when he turns to face the small changeling drone landing at the center of the new beam, “Not you...”

1313’s jaw drops. The drone isn’t wearing cardboard armor like at the Summer Sun Celebration, but a real, fitted Nightguard suit.

“Almost so cool. *Almost*. Timing and everything,” says Pink Sunset, shaking his head as Torchlight is just staring at the drone, frozen.

A Nightguard mare whose body is covered with glowing tattoos similar to Zamira's markings speaks out:

"Like you, monster, every creature obeys its nature and needs an outlet," her beam brightens as it pushes stunned Torchlight to his knees, "And our newest member has been denied its outlet for a while now," she grins sideways at the drone, "65536, *dig your heart out!*"

The words fail to have the desired epic effect, as 65536 gives her a confused look, asking:

"Are you sure, Miss Glimmer? I think that's one of the bits I *really* need inside me at all times."

Steel Glimmer denies the laws of gravity and facehoofs with her free leg... somehow.

"IT WAS A FIGURE OF SPEECH," she points at Torchlight, "DIG THAT GUY!"

As 65536 lunges at Torchlight, the dreamweaver can only scream:

"No... NOT THE LASER PLUSH RIDING BUG AGAIN!
NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

1313 breathes out, enjoying the catharsis of watching Torchlight go through the equivalent of getting thrown into a blender turned up to maximum. Some kind of mantis-like creature tries to break through the open wounds and grow into a larger size, but that's pretty much lost as its chunks get indiscriminately flung everywhere by the digging drone flailing all four legs without much coordination.

Soon, all members of the serving staff, frozen in place by Zamira's powder, drop to the floor, unconscious. The ceiling returns, and most signs of the waking nightmare vanish albeit, unfortunately, the rotting chunks of changelings aren't among those.

"What was that about the laser plush?" asks Steel Glimmer.

“I’m not sure,” 65536 scratches its helmet, “I think I recall having a really weird dream about Not-Blue... but it was when I still had the big headaches.”

“I’ll explain it over some drinks,” Sharp shakes his head, “Bladehoof, call for a clean-up. Deep Dark, find a paladin to properly scan this place. Pink, Glimmer, 65536,” he walks over to sitting 1313 who looks up at him, “We’re taking ‘Blueblood’ here to the castle.”

“I’m coming with you,” Zamira walks over to 1313 with an expression that clearly states - I’m *superglueing* myself to that changeling if I hear *a single* objection.

Sharp gives her a raised eyebrow before nodding.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Pink, grab the changeling. 65536, hop on my back.”

“I can walk just fine,” objects the drone.

“That was an order, recruit. We’ll be moving fast and-”

“No need to explain. You had me at order, sir!” 65536 puffs out its chest and salutes, flinging remaining gooey mess from its hoof all over its helmet, “Oh holes...”

As Pink Sunset slings 1313 over his back, Zamira looks at 65536 furiously cleaning its hooves and head.

“Aren’t you a bit short to be a Nightguard?”

“I’m tall in huggability!” 65536 beams at her, “Hey, you’re the funny stripey lady from the Celebration! You tried to boop me and kept missing,” 65536 rises on its hind legs and pokes her nose, “Hee hee. Boop!”

Canterlot castle throne room.

As they enter, 1313 reassures himself that will be glad if he never sees the place again. Now, if Zamira keeps his secret he should be okay now that the explosive collar is gone. Chopped off head should be survivable if they don't bury him, Hanging a changeling isn't really a thing, and anything else that doesn't leave him burned to a crisp might only end up with him getting out of Canterlot in pieces that just need picking up.

Pink Sunset lowers him on the floor with surprising amount of care and leaves alongside 65536. Only Sharp Biscuit, he, and Zamira remain in front of princess Celestia sitting on the throne, clearly having been roused from the bed.

"Your Highness," Sharp starts talking, "This changeling has replaced your nephew. We discovered it while we were searching for the unicorn who tried to assassinate 65536."

Celestia only nods.

"Thanks to him and Zamira who seemed to be working together, we were able to track down a certain unicorn mercenary going by the name Hazard Pay. If you ask about his current whereabouts, I will categorically deny knowing anything and refer you to Princess Luna's orders. All I have to say about the matter is that he will never become a repeated offender."

Celestia sighs.

"I really have to explain to Luna that things changed during her exile. We can't just be doing extrajudicial killings anymore. Nevermind, keep going, Commander."

"Steel Glimmer and Night Hunter followed these two and faced a dreamscape monstrosity bleeding into our world through a maid mentally tortured to death by a creature Luna calls a dreamweaver. Finally, we used them as bait to lure in the dreamweaver and thanks to 65536 we were able to destroy it."

"You *destroyed* a dreamscape monster in the real world without using magic? One of the most dangerous ones on top of that."

“Yes, Your Highness. It seems that changeling drones are capable of that. Even Luna was shocked by the fact when it happened the first time.”

Celestia blinks in surprise.

“The first-? Ah, some stranger points of 65536’s confused storytelling are becoming clearer. Thank you, Commander. I will have a chat with 65536 later,” she looks at 1313, “As for you, changeling, on one level I’m happy that you managed to get to the bottom of my task. I admit that after I gave it to you, I expected you to flee the city.”

1313 tilts his head.

“Wait, you *knew* I was a changeling?”

Celestia nods.

“As much as I loathe it to admit it, you were... too good of a pony to be my nephew. With such a big change in character right after the changeling invasion, I grew suspicious but our detection spells and alarms were in their early stages plus, as I learned later, 65536 was the one triggering them at random times before we knew about it. That’s why I called on Hufeisen, one of the very few ponies who knew about changelings in detail. The entire weekend training exercise was to identify you.”

“And you *didn’t* identify Torchlight as a freaking evil nightmare parasitic mantis monster?!” 1313 raises his voice, finding the strength to stand up.

“Only you were under direct supervision,” Celestia shakes her head, “Dreamscape isn’t a domain of paladins or even old witch hunters,” when 1313 sighs and slumps down again, Celestia adds, “Now that you’re here I am going to ask directly - where is Blueblood? The only reason I didn’t send the guards to fetch you was out of fear of you harming him or leaving him stashed somewhere-”

“1313 HARMING BLUEBLOOD?!” Zamira practically screams at Celestia, “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA ABOUT THE DEPTH OF SWINEHOOD YOUR NEPHEW IS?!”

Three pairs of eyes lock on Zamira.

“I would advise you to very carefully reconsider your words,” says Celestia slowly, “I know Blueblood is far from a paragon of virtue but-”

“BUT NOTHING!” Zamira stomps right under the raised dais with the throne and *glares* at Celestia, “That bastard outfitted 1313 with an explosive collar and forced him to take his place while he ran off to some holiday resort so that he wouldn’t have to deal with anything related to the invasion! Most of the staff knows it! Most of the staff even know how to trigger the damn collar! *Everypony* knows that if he could get away with it, he would have put something like that on every single pony that has to deal with his remarks, groping, and attitude. The *only* reason why my bodyguard unit still serves there is that his father pays leagues better than anypony else in this damn city because he *knows* what sort of an asshole Blueblood is!” she looks at 1313 and sighs, “Ahh shite... I guess there goes my early retirement bonus.”

Celestia looks at Sharp, her face unreadable.

“Commander, I know my power over the Nightguard is extremely limited, but may I use your services?”

“It depends, Your Highness,” replies Sharp openly.

“You’re going to stay here while we listen to the whole story these two have to tell. Afterwards, I’m going to give you several addresses and you’ll check them out. If Blueblood is staying on any of those... well, just let me know.”

Sharp smirks.

“I believe I’ll be able to spare a Nightguard or three for some light recon.”

“Thank you. Now, change- what is your name or rank?” she asks 1313.

“1313, Princess.”

“Now, 1313, how about you and your unexpected *friend* tell me everything from the start.”

“Before that, can I ask something?” 1313 rubs his neck. When Celestia nods, he continues, “Do you have any idea why the necklace didn’t explode?”

“I can’t say, but I do believe I now understand why Hufeisen kept snickering after he told me about your identity. As mostly earth ponies, manipulation of enchanted items was core training for witch hunters,” from the corner of her mouth, Celestia adds quietly, “That old ass...”

Zamira and 1313 exchange glances and the zebra shrugs.

“So, this buggo crashed through Blueblood’s roof-”

Author's Notes:

So this is it. Aside from the epilogue, this is the end of 1313's story.

Could it have been done separately? Probably yes.

Was that cliffhanger completely pointless? Yes.

Did it resolve anything major? Not really.

Any relevance or big boon to the overall world? No.

So why does it exist? *Shrug*

Should I stop talking? Yes.

I still hope it was a bit of fun to read.

1988, 9999: 12

It's barely morning as the first rays of sunlight pierce the tree canopy after the encounter with the 'the biggest shiny', and all drones are watching 1988's horn shimmer green as he digs through 9999's memories of the wild last night. As they all know, it'll still be nearly two hours before the lumber camp ponies set off to work so right now it's still time to rest. On the other hole, a thing is happening, so their natural curiosity doesn't allow them to just drift off again.

"Hmmm," 1988's horn finally goes dim and he rubs his chin.

"Errfin fls nummm..." 9999's eyes cross as it keels over on the soft grass.

None of the other drones move, as their links tell them that 9999 is okay, just tired from the detailed examination of its mind. Several of them are familiar with the process of high ranks obtaining information from drones and while normally there used to be about fifty-fifty chance of the drone being confused for the rest of their rapidly shortened life back home, 9999 was adamant about doing this and 1988 looked careful as he did his thing.

"I'll be frank, our situation isn't good," says 1988 after some thought, "But you did a remarkably good job at leading the ponies away. Hole, I've known warriors who would have panicked and ran off straight back here with them in tow. *Extremely* well done, 9999."

A round of applause bursts out from the previously sleepy drones, all of them suddenly alive and straight up jumping up and down.

"WOOO!"

"Yaaaaay!"

"Go, High Score! Go High Score!"

"CELEBRATION PILE!"

1988 raises an eyebrow as the drones jump on each other.

“Ughhh...” 9999 sits up, blinking out of sync.

1988 clops his forelegs together loudly to draw the drones’ attention and receives a bunch of teal pairs of eyes locked on himself.

“Does this basic praise really mean so much to you?” he asks.

Nod nod nod!

“I can expl-uhhh,” 9999 moans, “...why am I so loud...?”

“No need,” 1988 shakes his head and pats 9999, “I think I’m starting to understand you guys, whether I want to or not,” he stands up and walks over to the drone pile, “All of you did a great job. Your ability to gain genuine affection would put some infiltrators to shame.”

He continues, patting the head of each individual drone:

“36658, I’m not about to call you a drug dealer, but without you we would have had a much tougher time healing all of us.”

“57999, well, you supported 36658 and you helped ponies chill out with your drugs so that they would accept us easier.”

“20100, where others connected to adults, you found your niche with the few foals here and, hopefully, you’ll bring your moving pictures back home in some capacity and they’ll catch on.”

“17070, you sacrificed your health to prove- try to prove that you can learn more than just digging, and found a pony who appreciates you. You might not see Ladle’s emotions like I do, but you sure got under her skin, in a good way.”

“Umm, and you too, Silent. You might not have connected with ponies like the others, but you guarded this place which allowed them to go out and do their thing.”

With all drones, aside from the Silent who is still watching his hoof after having its head stroked, completely stunned and staring at him slack-jawed, 1988 starts pacing.

“...I’m never washing this head again...” whispers someone.

“...you have a different one? You can’t have another one...”

“...you don’t know that!”

“...that’s illegal! The Queen said so...”

“...no, she didn’t!”

“...*she did!*”

“...nu uh...”

“...uh huh...”

“*However,*” 1988 raises his voice instead of facehoofing, preferably with a heavy rock, “we can’t get complacent. As 9999 just showed me, there are ponies on our track. It managed to lure them away but I don’t want to underestimate them. I think I’m the only one here who can have a look around without being spotted in case they didn’t get fooled completely, so I’ll have to check the area myself. That means 9999 will have to be the hive mind node until I return.”

“My head...” 9999 groans.

“I’m planning around it, don’t worry,” 1988 continues without looking at it, “Everyone, you’ll have until two o’clock to do your usual business - help ponies, gain love. Afterwards, you’re to come back here. 9999, you’ll stay here for now. I have something else for you to do that won’t cause you another headache. Any questions? No? Good.”

17070 finds Swirling Ladle earlier than usual today. The cook is currently busy sorting plates and cups in preparation for breakfast.

“Hello!” says the drone with a smile, “Can I help you?”

“Good morning, little number,” she smiles back and gives the drone a hug, “You’re up early today.”

“Can you point, Miss Ladle?” 17070 tilts its head once the hug is over, “I still can’t hear you.”

“Straight to the point, I see,” Ladle chuckles, “I was just about to set the table for breakfast,” she points at the table and, one by one, at the tableware, “One plate, one cup, one spoon.”

17070 nods happily before asking:

“Oh, one more thing! Uhh, how to say that?” it looks around before pointing at a large, flat stump for chopping wood, “Where can I find something like that? I want to try making things but we don’t have a flat spot at our camp.”

“Hmmm,” she scratches her head, “You know what? Help me set the tables first and I’ll ask somepony later,” she points at the table.

17070 gets it after a brief thought. A trade. Simple. It does a thing, it gets... something.

“1988?”

“Yes?” the infiltrator, sitting in the center of the now empty changeling clearing and replaying 9999’s memories in his head for anything he might have missed, opens his eyes.

“What if those armed ponies find us?” 9999 voices the question 1988 doesn’t have a perfect answer for, “I mean, the ponies here didn’t chase us away only because they didn’t know about Canterlot. The armed ones recognized what I was immediately.”

“We might not even get a chance to talk,” 1988 nods, “I know. I’ve been thinking about it since this morning. Any ideas?”

“What? From me?” 9999 leans back.

“Sure, why not?”

“I mean... we drones don’t really have any options when high ranks come to get us,” 9999 hangs its head, “But if we did... I think we’d run as fast and as far as we could and make a tunnel or something there. Or we’d stay here and hope the ponies here like us enough to make sure we could talk.”

“If you did run then you’d probably starve. We had incredible luck to find a place as far away from current events as this,” 1988 finishes the thought, “Option two - if we stayed, the trackers came, and then told the ponies here what happened it would be too late to run.”

“Yeah, sorry,” 9999 shakes its head, “I don’t know enough to help here. Buuut if we have to run, what about the group that left with the cocoons? They’ll be returning straight here.”

1988 blinks several times.

“Ahh, holes... I got so caught up with *our* situation that I completely forgot,” he grits his teeth, takes a deep breath, counts to ten, and then breathes out.

“What was that for?” asks 9999, “Another infiltrator trick?”

“A pony trick, in fact. It helps to slow your head down. Try it when you need to think,” replies 1988, “Okay, I think I’ve got it.”

Several places on the area map light up in 9999’s head as the drone does the breathing trick, which is followed by a series of symbols and pictures.

“We are...” 9999 tries to understand, “Oh! We’re making marks that only changelings will understand somewhere where they’re likely to pass through on their way back so that they have the time to turn away. We do that as drones in dangerous sections of the tunnels too!”

“*You* will be making the marks I showed you. I wanted to let you rest, but we must be ready. I’ll have a chat with Sawtooth and inform him that I received a divine sign or something that our pilgrimage might be ready for the next step.”

The promised two o'clock arrives, and 1988 checks his hive links because 9999 still hasn't come back. However, he senses that the drone is on its way and will return by the time his own hive link is out of reach for the drones.

"I'm coming!" calls out 17070, barely visible through the line of trees separating the changeling clearing from the lumber camp, and chomps down on something before continuing to drag it with its mouth.

With everyone accounted for, 1988 simply says:

"9999 will be here soon. You wait until I get back. I might come late but we'll know where we stand."

As the sound of his hoofsteps disappears, the gathered drones turn to the most interesting thing on the menu, which turns out to be 17070 dragging a stump of its own size by a root in its mouth. Seeing that, the drones surround it and 20100, as the highest rank present, mentally asks:

"Where are we pulling that?"

17070 points at a spot near the center of the clearing, and in only a short moment the stump is set up in a freshly-dug shallow hole, its roots covered with dirt.

"So what's it for?"

"For prepping things," replies 17070, patting a rather large pouch on a string around its neck, "I'll show you later. Can you make a firepit?"

"Sounds dangerous..."

"No, that's the circle of rocks ponies have in their camp. Small shiny lives there, but to stop it from running away you gotta clean the place up and surround it with rocks."

"On it!"

Contrary to expectations, there's nothing *more* productive than a bunch of bored drones with a higher amount of love than 'starvation', and they all scatter in search of proper rocks. After all, 1988 didn't exactly define that 'here' meant 'only this exact clearing'. It will be fine.

17070 empties the contents of the borrowed pouch, revealing those to be broken and bent pieces of rusting metal as well as a much *smaller* pouch. A quick look around later, which reveals a stoic Silent watching it, it darts off back to the pony camp as quickly as it can. After all, 1988's main concern was that they should be within range of hive links and his is still easily accessible. It will probably be within the scope of current standing orders.

Soon enough, 17070 returns, the big pouch having safely been returned to ponies.

"Good job keeping an eye on things," it smiles at the Silent who, to its surprise, returns a barely noticeable smile... or maybe the corner of its mouth just curls up in an attempt to mimic 17070's expression. Without any way to communicate it's hard to tell.

9999 finally returns to the camp, thankful for a chance to rest as the dull pressure on its head starts taking its toll on its stamina again. However, it *does* feel easier to bear this time, as if part of the drone was adapting to being a hive mind node.

"Hey, guys!" it greets the drones, each busy examining various items ranging from sticks and rocks to particularly colorful leaves and even an almost eye-sized shard of glass, "Whoah! Where did you get that?"

20100 replies instead of the new and proud owner of the shard.

"I got it from Magic Lantern. It's a piece of thingy he called a lens from a potty corona or... uhh, something like that. He didn't need that anymore so he just gave it to me, can you believe it? It makes shinies dance and he just gave it away! Ponies are weird," it shakes its head, "57999 traded four

particularly round rocks for it. Look, they all fit into cup holders!” 20100 raises both its now filled forelegs to demonstrate.

“Still a fantastic deal,” adds 57999, raising the shard of glass to catch a ray of light coming through the canopy, “If I turn it this way up, it makes the light thinner. And the other way - boom!- wider.”

“Neeeeeat!” 9999 trots over to have a look before glancing at one drone with its back turned to the others, “What’s 17070 doing on that stump?”

“It said it’s a surprise and that we’re not to look, but we helped it make a circle of stones for the fire shiny to live in. It was so busy it didn’t even join in trading.”

“Gotcha,” 9999 nods and simply plops itself on the grass, rubbing its temples.

“Ah! Speaking of trading,” 36658 slaps its forehead, “High Score, we did all our trading without you. You wanna redo it? I mean, you didn’t have a shot at getting the shiny changer.”

9999 smiles, shaking its head.

“You know what? I think I’ll pass this time. You did your best to get your shiny changer, and I was so busy with the things 1988 wanted from me that I didn’t even have time to find anything that you guys might want.”

The drones look at it. The drones ponder the situation. The drones exchange looks. The drones nod.

“We can give you something,” 36658 offers, “I mean, it would be tiny bits but you’re the Shiny Bringer! You’d for sure be able to trade them for something valuable in a way we wouldn’t think of.”

“Yeah!” the other drones cheer.

Seeing the complete trust in their eyes, 9999 smiles and shakes its head.

“You haggled hard for what you got. Keep it, you deserve it. I’m just happy that you’re all happy.”

36658 *beams* and throws its forelegs into the air.

“The Shiny Bringer doesn’t need shinies and trinkets, IT IS THE SHINY!”

“Woooo!” the others cheer. Even 17070, listening through the hive link of someone else, lets out a busy wooo without looking up from its stump.

There’s one exception. No, it’s not the Silent.

20100 walks up to 9999 and after some hesitation opens its mouth.

“Do... you not like us anymore?”

9999 leans back as if physically struck.

“What? Of course I like all of you. Why would you even think that?”

“I mean, you don’t want to trade, you’re always busy, and... you just *feel* different,” 20100 hangs its head, “Sorry.”

It flinches as 9999 pulls it into a hug.

“Guys, as I said - I’m proud of you. All of you. You survived contact with ponies, you gained the amount of love no drones ever had, you recovered from wounds that normally had us eaten or sent to the crusher. We’ll get through this, we’ll get home, and then we’ll... then we’ll...”

20100 slowly pushes 9999 away and shuffles a few steps backwards.

“Do we *really* want to go back home?” it asks quietly. With a round of muted gasps, 20100 is now the center of *everyone*’s attention. It looks around, “What? You were *all* thinking it!”

“Well... yeah, but thinking it doesn’t get you instantly minced,” admits 57999. And everything would have been fine if it just didn’t add, “But you

don't say that, especially in front of a high r-" it clamps its forelegs on its mouth, but it's too late.

9999's eyes have already teared up, and yet the hurt look coupled with its mouth slightly open from raw shock is still second to the sudden feeling of detachment from its body. When the feeling in 9999's body returns, the drone feels something it barely ever had felt before. Drones, in general, are aware of their lot in life, knowing there is no change, so genuine *anger* is tough to find.

I saved some of you at least TWICE back home. Here, I was the one 156 sent to die during the first contact if the ponies were hostile. I was the one who saved 1988 from a nightmarish monster. I was here when 1988 was gone, barely holding on in agony when I had to hold the hive mind together. I was the one running away from ponies and fighting a monster last night.

9999 takes a deep breath and counts to ten.

And I'm the one who does it because I love you, guys, and because no one else will give a damn if we die. Not a single real high rank will care or even remember what killed us so that they'd warn the next drone who does the job.

9999 blinks away the tears as it walks over to 57999...

...and pats the terror-frozen drone's head.

"I'll think of something, guys," says 9999, "I promise."

Author's Notes:

I swear I meant for things to happen, but as always this turned out longer than it was supposed to. Chalk it up to poor planning and writing. Hopefully, this still works as a full chapter.
Next up - Chrysalis vs. Shroud.

Anyway, since this is the last update before 24th - Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Peaceful Hearth's Warming, Bloody Spawning of Ur-Gash the Soul-Render, skulls for the skull throne, or anything else you celebrate.

(Note to self - write something about post-invasion drones getting to know Hearth's Warming. Something along the lines of the glitterbug winter episode of FiM)

CH: 12/13 - Shroud

The oppressive presence of Shroud makes Chrysalis' gasp for air.

This is the first time Chrysalis can get a proper look at the first queen. Unlike Chrysalis' sharply contrasting black and teal scheme, Shroud is almost monochromatically grey, although her smooth mane and tail are more silvery white compared to her dusty grey coat. In the memory where Haze easily defeated her, Shroud was desperate, at the end of her rope, and facing the pinnacle of changeling power. Now, despite the two queens looking eye to eye, Shroud feels as if she's towering over Chrysalis.

"Look," Chrysalis steadies her voice as she lowers herself into a combat stance, "You had the opportunity to see where your meddling led us. We are a species near extinction-"

Chrysalis barely catches the silvery white blur of Shroud's eyes and mane as the ancient queen attacks, and manages to raise her forelegs to block the presumed blow.

The attack connects, its loud crack spreading through the hive mind, forcing Chrysalis to stumble backwards, and a few things cross her mind at once. One - Shroud isn't physically strong. Two - she is quick, but not warrior levels of quick. Three - she simply tried to punch Chrysalis, not spear her or hack her head off using any transformation.

Burning off her love to create her own prison must have worked.

Chrysalis mentally lashes out in response, curious how the strength of her mind would match against Shroud...

...and hits nothing as if the old queen wasn't even right in front of her.

That moment of surprise is enough, and Chrysalis' world goes pitch black, leaving two glowing, white eyes the only visible thing like two moons in the night sky.

A member of a crowd under a podium in the center of their forest village, Star Seer is standing next to his wife, between whose forelegs sits their colt in his early teens. Nearly the entire tribe, over three thousand heads, gathered here in anticipation to listen to what their leader has to say.

Of course, they all heard the rumors that a war was coming and despite their location deep in the woods they wouldn't be spared. The young, barely united nation of Equestria already attracted terrifying enemies from overseas.

While the central plaza is completely silent, Star Seer's mind is crowded with voices of everypony gathered here, all anxious but ready to play their part for the safety of their new nation despite not knowing what the role would be.

The voices go silent, and Star Seer nuzzles his wife as their visibly nervous chieftain walks onto the dais and up to the podium, followed by his two guards, one of them giving a ride to Misty, the chieftain's little daughter, and the other a unicorn wearing full plate armor decorated with golden symbols of the sun.

The chieftain clears his throat. Clearly, there are more foreign pony guests watching so he's about to speak out loud instead of normal telepathy.

"Ahem, I, umm-" he pauses, "Can everypony hear me?" he turns towards the armored unicorn when he sees almost half of the gathered ponies exchange confused looks, "Hey, I don't think they can all hear me. Can you magic something up?"

The unicorn's horn flashes and he nods.

"Let's try- whoah!" the chieftain leans backwards in surprise at his newly amplified voice.

"Think we can all hear you now, Wistful!" somepony calls out.

“Yeah! I think even the yaks in the north heard you this time!” somepony adds to the laughter of the crowd.

“Oh shush,” Wistful chuckles and waves his foreleg, “So, uh, you know me. I’m not much of a public speaker so I’ll make this quick. You all heard the rumors that griffons are attacking earth pony villages on the coast. Well, it’s much worse. They have established beachheads and are advancing west from the coast, burning and pillaging. From the reports the alicorn princesses sent out, it’s clear that these griffons are not just raiding parties like usual,” Wistful sighs, “This is an invading force that either takes ponies as work slaves or...” he grits his teeth, “Or they eat them.”

Gasps and terrified yelps come from the crowd as well as several sounds of ponies throwing up.

“It... gets worse,” Wistful says mournfully, “Somehow, the griffons managed to find a way to severely limit the unicorn use of magic for scrying and communication over long distances, which brings *us* into the picture,” he nods to the green pony by his side, “With the help of Twinkleshine here, the unicorns figured out that the griffon method of blocking magical communication doesn’t apply to our telepathy,” Wistful lowers his head, “Sorry, guys, I was hoping it would be enough for us to be communications officers or something, but the griffons are somehow always ready for anything the ponies throw at them.”

Suddenly, a mental message from Wistful spreads through the crowd, words he deemed the unicorn onlookers aren’t allowed to hear.

We aren’t warriors, but we will be. I managed to secure a way to avoid what’s about to happen. If any of you want to escape, leave now and go to the Winter plaza. Whoever remains will sacrifice everything for Equestria and for us.

“So, Princess Celestia and I reached a pact,” Wistful continues his speech, a small smile growing on his face as he sees various groups form in response to quick telepathic exchanges and leave without being spotted by the Equestrian paladin standing behind Wistful, “With the use of pony magic, we will undergo physical changes required to fight, and our telepathic link

will allow us to keep in touch despite the strange griffon technology. The spell is ready, and will spread to every single one of us through our telepathy. Our equestrian friend here,” he nods back to the paladin, “is ready to begin whenever we are,” Wistful looks over the crowd again, seeing that despite several hundred ponies quietly leaving, the others spread out to make it more difficult to see, “I think there will be enough time for questions afterwards.”

Star Seer looks around. His wife is still there but his colt is gone, having left with his grandmother. If the flutterponies have to fight in a war, it will be the adults and the able.

Right, some change. Maybe strength enhancements, maybe some transformation. It's not like we haven't been brewing potions to achieve effects like that for generations.

The paladin by Wistful's side telekinetically unlocks two heavy latches on the side of his plate mail holding a long scepter of sorts, and levitates it in front of him. As he slams the dais with its bottom, a shockwave makes everyone in the crowd shiver as the touch of static electricity makes their hair stand on edge. The red crystal on top of it flares up with entwined crimson and emerald light and black smoke. Wistful closes his eyes.

I'm sorry, everypony.

A ray of light from the scepter hits Wistful whose two antennae on his forehead flare up with the same light and flash in tune with everypony else's right before the telepathic screams of mental anguish begin.

Star Scribe would love to say that the agony of his body twisting and burning in with green fire is the worst part, but that would be a lie. The teeth lengthening and growing with his gums tearing open to make space for more is a close second. The worst part, however...

The worst part is that once the physical transformation is over and the sound of screaming, flesh ripping, and bones cracking goes quiet, he looks at his wife and sees his own horror mirrored in her own eyes examining him and seeing what's become of them.

I used to be a painter. I used to be a painter. I used to be a painter.

Bright Brush is trembling, staring at the corpse of an armed griffon whose head he bit off moments ago. The bitter taste of iron in his mouth breaks through the shock of his first kill, and he tries to push out chunks of flesh stuck in his teeth with his tongue.

Bad idea, because it brings forth the taste.

He throws up.

He's not alone.

Of the five 'changelings' who ambushed the griffon patrol at night, there's only one who isn't sobbing and choking on bile.

Bright Brush looks at the young female staring at her kill and gasping for breath through a foreleg pressed against her mouth.

"Your father did this to us..." he growls between hucking goo and blood. It's almost cathartic to speak out loud these days.

Misty's eyes tear up before she bites her lip and replies in a whisper:

"We'll get through this. We'll go home. It won't matter how we look. We're still us."

Bright Brush sighs and wipes his mouth.

"You're right. I'm sorry," he forces a chuckle, "But your father isn't getting any Hearth's Warming presents this year."

Misty chuckles back before walking over and giving him a hug.

"I think he knows and he'd better be getting all of us something out of his own pocket, or else..."

The changelings exchange exhausted smiles before resuming silently creeping through the darkness. According to the scouts, there are two more patrols following this route.

I used to be a painter. We'll go home after this. I'll be painting autumn leaves again.

This plan was months in the making.

Its target - Fort Grasp, the griffon fortress overlooking the main naval base of the Griffon Empire, and the seat of the war council.

Grand Admiral August Redtalon, the leader of the Imperial Navy and the Emperor's cousin examines a large map on the long table with beautifully carved ivory statuettes marking the locations of various military detachments, both griffon and pony.

"Westbrook," August looks at an elderly griffon wearing an eye patch seated across the table from him, "What's the problem with the Black Ops? The last few reports we received were distinctly wrong and led to the losses counting in the hundreds."

"Our intelligence gathering operations are failing, August. If I knew why, they wouldn't be," frowns Westbrook, "My best agents are returning with information they believe is accurate. However, my investigation-"

"...tortures his own griffons..." mutters a different griffon leader which earns him August's scowl and shuts him up.

"-revealed that some of our agents seem to have had their memories tampered with."

"Unicorn magic?"

"It seems so," Westbrook scratches his beak, "However, I suspect there is more and it must be connected to our recent losses."

“Gentlegriffons, you are the united leadership of the Imperial armies. I gathered you here not to punish you for your failures, but to have you pool your knowledge,” August raises his voice, “As you know, the tide of war has turned. The unicorns led by Princess Celestia unleashed a tactical spell strike within the borders of their own country which evaporated over a third of our army. That is a level of magic our istrium blockades cannot stop or mitigate. However, we still outnumber pony forces manyfold, so if we spread out we can still fight back,” he looks over the gathered griffons, “But only if we figure out what the secret to the recent pony success is. My navy is holding our southern and northern fronts without a problem. Zebra corsairs can’t outfight a proper blockade, and the pony navy based in Manehattan port isn’t strong enough to mount a counterattack on Griffonstone. The issue is our ground forces.”

“Look, our patrols are getting taken out,” General Brightfeather speaks out, “We had to shrink the perimeters and send redundant groups out just for safety. Our best bet is to group up and send larger forces past the impassable spell strike site to pincer the Everfree camp. If we hit them hard, they’ll be forced to retreat.”

“Or they will just nuke another area of their country and take the rest of our forces with it,” August frowns.

“Then we simply have to coordinate a split assault all over the coast,” Westbrook joins in, “August, the zebra corsairs can’t cause that much damage if we weaken our southern flank and turtle our forces in the ports, right?”

“Communication is the worst problem for the zebras. They might not even notice it for a day or two if we do so.”

“Then how about we use the ships to transport units of a hundred griffons or so, each within response distance from the nearest two? It will endanger our safe naval corridor but this way our forces will be numerous enough to fight off an ambush while still small enough to not endanger the war effort if they get nuked by the unicorns.”

“This could work,” August rubs his chin, “It will require careful timing and most of my ships but it is a sound idea. Brightfeather?”

“Without the istrium blocks, it will be possible to use magic to detect us, and it will be impossible to maintain supply lines. Besides, the units will still have to regroup in order to besiege any major target.”

“Then attack minor targets - villages, supply routes,” August smiles, “Let’s see who starves first - a military unit or a bunch of civilians.”

Sunspot, the last surviving changeling of many groups whose only job during the past three months was to gain trust and access to the war council by finding the right target to replace and figure out their routine, is standing guard by the door.

Their scouting operations discovered this place, discovered the time of the meetings of the entire Imperial high command, and managed to smuggle in fully charged magical crystals rigged to blow up.

This is the final step of the operation. All Sunspot has to do is to figure out a time where the council will meet again in full, prepare the explosives, and set the timer.

This will be the final nail in their coffin. After this, I’m going home. Griffons will never set paw in Equestria again. We’ll all be free. Even if they turned us into these... monstrosities, we’ll be home and free. We’ll have each other.

As the war council nears its end, Sunspot breathes a sigh of relief. His contact outside the fortress heard all this information through him and-

An order comes.

What?

The order repeats itself.

No, you can’t!

There's only one thing for the general changeling population left to learn. They weren't picked due to their telepathic connections only for undetectable and unblockable communication. It was also to be easily controlled by a central power.

The order comes and Sunspot can't resist.

The magical crystals strapped to him and hidden under his griffon armor grow hotter as he starts walking towards the central table.

"Witherbeak, is there a pr-"

August Redtalon doesn't get a chance to finish his question.

This plan was months in the making. The feelings of a single changeling aren't allowed to stop it.

Watching half of the fortress get basically evaporated in blue flames, Misty growls. She didn't know about the *real* plan until the order came but it's there and then where she realizes how little changelings really mean to the ponies.

We aren't their allies. We're just their weapons.

The war turned completely. No longer it was ponies barely defending their coastline from invading griffon forces, now it was the Griffon Empire having its cities eradicated by tactical spell strikes conjured from the safety of the captured territories. Griffon politics helped, as with the first losses caused by changeling infiltration and pony counterattacks the Imperial families turned against each other. With ponies having no desire to further take over griffon lands, Equestria offered to accept material reparations and withdraw its forces from the broken Empire.

However, the most powerful Imperial family, the Redtalons, still needed to receive one final message to hammer the point.

Misty, well-fed and having extensive knowledge of her own body after nearly a year of constant combat and infiltration deployments, is walking invisible and inaudible through Bloodstone, the current capital city of the Empire. Like some changelings who opted to learn basic magic, she permanently transformed her body to possess a horn instead of the pair of antennae the flutterponies had originally.

It takes next to no effort to fly onto the previously discovered balcony belonging to the Emperor Aurelius Redtalon himself. The two griffon guards stationed on the outside have no idea what hit them as they slowly collapse on the stone floor with their throats slit and beaks muffled with goo. All her next step requires is a basic magical incantation muffling the sounds coming from the room ahead of her, and she pulls it off perfectly.

One thing has to be said about Aurelius Redtalon - he's not a coward.

When Misty reveals herself along with the nearly soundless opening of the glass door, he calls for help at the same moment as he reaches for a hatchet next to the armchair he's been sitting in and reading. By the time she makes two more steps, the Emperor is already lunging at her. In the next instant, he's on the floor, coughing up blood due to his ribs and bones broken by a telekinetic blast that would leave even most unicorns gaping in awe.

"This is what ponies had to create to defeat you," hisses Misty, standing over the dying Emperor, "And I want to make sure this doesn't happen again. That 'istrium' of yours the unicorns are so afraid of, how did you learn about it? The bigwigs I already questioned pointed to you personally."

"You'll... get nothing... from me..." gurgles Aurelius, "*Monster!*"

"They all say the same," snickers Misty and presses her horn against Aurelius' forehead.

Digging through strands of memories, she lets the griffon's mind unconsciously guide her towards her goal until...

She's standing in pitch darkness, feeling a presence dwarfing her own. Someone so incomprehensibly powerful that just their mark, the memory of

them is enough to make Misty's legs tremble and her head pound.

"Heh," chuckles an amused female voice dripping with honey, "Looks like we've been discovered. We can't have that, can we?" from the blackness, a golden alicorn figure steps out. Misty's changeling lust receptors go into overdrive *instantly* but she manages to retain enough control to stop herself from turning into a mindlessly drooling wreck. The alicorn looks down at her, "What a gorgeous white mane, like a burial shroud."

Aurelius' mind burns out with the flash of the alicorn's horn, taking Misty with it.

Who is it?

The darkness is still everywhere.

It's a changeling.

Name, it has- had a name.

Why is there nothing? Why can't it focus on anything?

Contacts. Fragments. Names. Other changelings.

"AAAH!" it wakes up, gasping for air, its mind empty.

It screams, clutching its head as random bits and pieces, images and feelings start ramming into its brain like shards of broken glass.

A voice:

"-like a burial shroud."

"YOU!" it- it- it- she growls, her eyes bulging in fury.

On instinct, her mind reaches out for any mental link it can sense and draws out of them any sense of herself, since she has none. No other creature

would have survived having its mind shattered like that, but there is no creature like a changeling.

The mind reassembles itself.

Misty...

She stands up, fangs bared, and gives Aurelius's corpse a final look.

"Maybe I judged you too harshly, griffon," she croaks through her throat ruined by minutes of non-stop screaming, "We're all just pawns of alicorns playing games against each other."

With the image of the golden alicorn burned into her mind, she leaves the Emperor's suite.

"I will be *your* shroud, alicorn."

Chrysalis screams in pain and fury as everything clicks together. Lifetime after changeling lifetime passes through her mind, all ruined by a single alicorn. Memories upon memories, untold thousands of years of experience split among millions of changelings throughout history.

"SCREAM ORCHESTRATED THE WAR AND THEN USED US OVER AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER!"

She collapses on the ground, smashing her forelegs down in impotent rage until her hooves start cracking.

Shroud's hoof splits into claws with which she grabs Chrysalis' horn. One second later, a green portal appears in front of the two. Shroud throws Chrysalis through before going in and appearing in the empty central plaza of the flutterpony village.

Her mouth curls up into a sadistic grin as she spots the changeling standing nearby with crestfallen expression.

“I finally found you, *traitor*,” growls Shroud.

Wistful walks over to twitching Chrysalis with bloody foam at her mouth.

“No matter what happened in the real world, Misty,” he sits down and strokes Chrysalis’ mane, “I love you,” he looks at Shroud, “Please, give me a reason to forgive you as well.”

Author's Notes:

I kinda realized that normals trying to gain freedom from powerful monsters playing games with them is a recurring theme around here. I mean, Void and the gods. Changelings and alicorns. Common people and billionaires...

1988, 9999: 13

Despite the shaken detachment caused by 57999's words fading away only slowly, 9999's reassurance that it will think of... something sounds far more genuine than it feels in the drone's mind. Think of what, though?

"So, we're supposed to stay here until 1988 returns..." it says instead, leaving the end of the sentence hanging.

"And we're not allowed to bother 17070 until it's ready to show us what it's doing," adds 20100.

"Nap?" 36658 offers the usual solution to undefined time. It's like worky time and sleepy time back home, but adapted for their current circumstances. One exchange of glances and nods later, the drones simply curl up, yawn, and close their eyes.

Left alone, 9999 sighs.

"So I'm a high rank now, huh? Sure doesn't feel like it..."

What can a DRONE *really* do when faced with the rules of the hive and orders from high ranks?

Something wet and warm slips along the tip of its ear, making 9999 gasp. Considering that the usual reaction of a spooked drone is a panicked dash in the opposite direction, a small part of 9999 which keeps its cool makes it simply turn its head and face the Silent that just licked its ear.

"Do you need anything?" asks 9999 despite knowing that there's no way it can get an answer. The Silent stops moving entirely, clearly required to drop everything else in order to process such a complex question.

Both corners of its mouth curl up.

It's mouth cracks open to show its teeth.

The rest of its face remains completely blank.

It looks at 9999, possibly... expecting something to happen?

“Is it that obvious?” asks 9999 quietly, “I was trying to not let it show, but I have no idea what to do. They believe I can *change* things now. The best thing I can do is still the same thing I did before - pull someone from under a cave-in, throw the biggest rock I can find at a pursuing skittery cruncher, or in the worst case just jump in the way of something dangerous and try to dig it. They *want* to go back home, I can feel it. They miss digging, they miss the tunnels, they miss the surprise of finding something new to trade, they even miss the occasional escape from monsters. But they just want all that without knowing that their worst enemies are other starving changelings. You know what they would love the most? If they could spend half of their day up here, in the world of color and ponies who like them, and then go underground to dig up some tunnels for the hive and do all the moving our eggs need. Holes, with enough love from the ponies I doubt they’d even bother sleeping,” 9999 sighs, “But that’s just not how the world works. I can’t make that happen.”

The Silent resumes processing before standing up, walking over to the bug zapper, and turning it on and back off a few times before pointing at 9999 who does a passable impression of the Silent’s blank face. Not losing the smile plastered on its face, it brings the zapper and puts it down directly between 9999’s forelegs.

“Why did you bring the zap- shiny...” breathes out 9999, correcting itself when it realizes what the Silent is trying to gesture at... probably, “Not you too,” it shakes its head.

The Silent remains staring and smiling.

“Fine. If you’re so intent on me being Shiny Bringer, then I’ll call you Smiley,” 9999 jabs the larger Silent’s chest.

No response. It seems that Smiley’s mind has exhausted its limited options.

With nothing more to do and unwilling to bother 17070, 9999 simply sits down, turns the bug zapper on, and begins looking into the blue glow.

“HA!”

The single syllable of victory wakes up the entirety of dronedom in the clearing with the exception of 9999 curled up near a bank. The sun is casting rays of light through the canopy, it’s warm, and the forest is alive with sounds that the drones can’t identify.

17070, the source of said ‘ha!’, turns away from its secluded stump, presenting a smoothed out, brown bowl to the drones. The smarter ones immediately look at the penetrated portalling helmet lying next to the stump.

“A new helmet?” 20100 voices the shared thought, transmitting its question through the hive link to the deaf drone simultaneously.

“Nu uh,” 17070 shakes its head with so much vigor that the small pouch around its neck bounces back and forth, “It’s a bowl! Mostly made from a thingy ponies called iron and it totally shouldn’t blow up this time.”

“Wooooow!” the drones fanned out in front of 17070 gasp.

“I cleaned off the brown dust all over the pieces I got and baked it into only a tiny bit of goop and dissolved iron. It’s not like the helmet that’s just a pot that’s got goop all over it, this is a totally new kind of goop!” explains 17070, beaming with excitement, “Now I’m gonna try to make nice smelling cooking like Miss Ladle does!”

“Ooooh!” 36658 nods, “I’ve been around the camp when she was cooking and it *did* smell delicious. Can we eat it, though?”

“You eat bark, buddy,” 57999 jabs it in the side.

“Point taken.”

“Now all we need is to make fire,” 17070 mutters while looking at the empty fire pit, “That might be a challenge.”

All present drones exchange glances before bursting into laughter.

Some twenty minutes *and totally no unauthorized leaving the camp later*, the pile of sticks inside the circle of rocks is burning under Smiley’s hooves holding the changeling bowl now containing water. Thankfully, changeling chitin is a fairly good material for heat insulation.

“Oookay,” 17070 rubs its temples, digging through its memory, “Now I’ll start adding tasty dusts and then it should start smelling nice and we should all enjoy it.”

“So, you don’t need anything right now?” asks 36658.

“Nope,” 17070 shakes its head.

“Good, because *brighty floaters!*” 36658 scuttles towards the others standing around 9999, who is sleeping in a ray of sunlight so hard that there’s a whole bunch of colorful butterflies sitting on its heated up black carapace, opening and closing their wings.

“You don’t think the brighty floaters are *eating* High Score, right?” asks 57999.

“No way!” 20100 shakes its head, “They’re like tiny almost-shinies, so they’re probably trying to understand the Shiny Bringer’s wisdom.”

“Should we do something like that too?”

“Maybe,” 36658 spreads its wings under the direct sunlight to imitate the butterflies, “like th-”

Everyone gasps as its fly-like wings scatter the light into a corona of infinite dancing colors.

“The Shiny Bringer taught brighty floaters to bring shiny too!” 57999’s jaw drops before it immediately spreads its wings, adding even more colors to

the mix.

“High Score made the brightly floaters show us the shiny ways!” 20100 joins in.

Disturbed by three changeling drones now buzzing their wings, the butterflies fly away as 9999 wakes up and gives the trio a confused look.

“What’s up, guys?”

“ThankyouforsendingbrightyfloaterstoshowusthewayShinyBringer!” blurts out 20100 before stopping, looking around, and adding, “We gotta find more signs!”

“You’re *right!*” 36658 nods.

“MORE SECRETS OF THE SHINY!” 57999 starts running around the clearing after giving one more look to 9999 and adding, “I’m super sorry for calling you a high rank in a bad way. You are High Score and even as a high rank you are the one true Shiny Bringer and I’ll never doubt you again!”

“What in all holes did I miss?” 9999 just sits there, dumbfounded.

“HOW COULD WE HAVE BEEN SO BLIND?!” cries out 20100, chasing a group of fleeing flies, “Get over here, mini buzzers! I just saw you make shinies with your wings too! THERE ARE SHINIES EVERYWHERE!”

On the slightly dimmer edge of the clearing, 36658 examines more flies lying motionless on some sort of white... thingy.

“Hey, there’s more mini buzzers here but these ain’t moving,” 36658 pokes the white thingy which sticks to its hoof, “Waaait, this is oddly familiar and I don’t like it...”

Several spiders crawl over to 36658 from the edges of the ripped spiderweb.

“AAAAAAH, LEGGY CREEPERS!” it yells, flying upwards as quickly as it can to get away from the spiders.

And *that* is a scream the drones understand *immediately*.

20100 and 57999 bolt, immediately jumping behind the nearest tree while 9999 charges towards 17070 oblivious to the chaos around.

“AAAAH, THERE’S MORE UP HERE! RUN AWAY BEFORE THEY GET YOUUUU!” 36658 crashes through several branches before panicking completely and dropping like a rock.

9999 changes its direction, now jumping towards 36658 and pawing at its face covered in white webbing.

“What are you doing? Go go go go!” gasps 36658.

A quick pat down by 9999 follows.

“You’re not melting,” 9999 examines 36658 whose heart is beating like a jackhammer.

“I’m not m-?” 36658 looks at 9999’s foreleg covered in webs, points at a spider there, and lets out a high-pitched screech of pure terror.

9999 raises its hoof and examines the spindly spider that, if it was capable of feeling fear, would definitely be more afraid of the drone than the other way around. With utmost care, 9999 lowers its foreleg again and slowly wipes the webbing off.

The spider immediately creeps away into a darker hiding place between the broken branches and leaves.

“The Shiny Bringer can make leggy creepers not carry you away and melt you over days and it can make them go away instead...” tears of survival shock are streaming from 36658’s eyes without it caring in the slightest.

20100 and 57999 leave their hiding place to rejoin the two. 36658 isn’t angry or even disappointed at them fleeing, obviously. That’s how a drone is supposed to act to survive. In fact, what 9999 did was the stupid thing that would result mostly only in the hive losing one more drone than it would otherwise, but...

But it's the Shiny Bringer. The bravest, smartest, and most skilled of all drones.

It's the Shiny Bringer and it worked.

It worked *because* the Shiny Bringer did it.

"Ow!" something lands on 9999's head from up above.

The drones look up at a squirrel standing on a branch unbroken by 36658 and holding a nut. It drops it on 9999's head again.

"Hey!"

36658, 20100, and 57999 look at 9999, then at the squirrel.

Again and again.

"IF THE HOPPY DROPPER WANTS A HOLY WAR, THEN A HOLY WAR THE DROPPER HAVE... WILL!" 36658's eye twitches in pure fury, "NO ONE ATTACKS HIGH SCORE THE SHINY BRINGER! CRUNCHSAAAAAADE!"

"Guys, it's fine. Let's just-" 9999 can't get a word in edgewise before the trio of drones fly up to the suddenly *extremely* unhappy squirrel, each one swinging one of the many broken branches.

Thankfully for the local wildlife, there's precisely zero coordination in their attacks, and the squirrel escapes through the nearest canopies where the drones can't follow due to orders.

9999 breathes a sigh of relief as some semblance of peace returns to the changeling camp.

"*Damn crap buck shit-*"

“Oh goopy holes!” mutters concentrating 17070, completely oblivious to the approaching cursing audible through its hive link, as a kind of whooshing and tearing noise drowns the peaceful crackling of the fire, “Why does this keep happening?”

The other drones, previously resting after having their dose of excitement in their holy war against the wildlife, rush over to examine a purple-ish rift in space-time continuum seemingly originating from 17070’s bowl still steadily held in Smiley’s forelegs.

“Hey, Smiley?” 9999 says in an uncertain tone, “You might want to put whatever that is on the ground. Slowly.”

“-stupid ears magic auto-targeting-”

As Smiley does so, something dark blue moves on the other side of the rift. The drones fan around to get a better look while still being out of reach of anything wanting to grab them.

The blue blur moves again, then it seems to notice the rift, and finally it stops. Two red-rimmed, teal eyes with black bags of exhaustion under them focus on the drones.

“Hey, it’s the soup pony!” 17070 points, its ears perking up, “Hello, soup pony. You’re not tiny this time.”

“-holes holes holes holes holes-”

“Guys, can you hear it too?” asks 9999, its ears twitching despite the neverending stream of cursing being only inside its head.

“CHANGELINGS!” the soup pony’s desperate cry makes all drones twitch and drowns out all thoughts of the strange hive link voice, “I don’t know how you managed to open this rift but I beg of you, help me-”

A wet slap followed by a scream of pain interrupts the sentence.

“-arrows, magical beams, grabbing claws that come out of the ground-”

“Eep!” the drones squeak as one when a long, spindly leg ending in a mantis-like claw reaches through the rift and begins pulling the side of it away as if it was spreading a curtain.

When a second leg reaches out to start widening the other side of the rift. 17070 puffs out its cheeks.

“YOU RUINED MY SCENTED WATER SOUP BOWL!” it lunges at the left leg, angrily digging like a dog peddling water which, to be completely accurate, is the pinnacle of drone combat skills.

A howl of pain comes from the rift in response, but two more legs grab the sides of the rift and start forcing through a brown, insectoid monstrosity resembling a mantis crossed with a worm. It hisses, and its long, vertically split jaw snaps at 17070 who applies the GTHO method of drone survival, jumping backwards with a single push of all four legs and landing a short distance away on its back.

“-stupid pony magic-”

“More of you bugs,” growls the monster, pulling more and more of its body through the rift, “You have caused enough trouble-EEEEAH?!”

9999 doesn’t stop running after knocking the bowl over and turning the vertical rift into a horizontal one lying on the ground, which swings the dreamweaver’s body like a flail and makes its head slam against the ground. It’s clearly not hurt in any capacity, but the moment of confusion is all 9999 wanted.

As for the next step, that might need some more thinking.

“-grab everything you have and we’re leaving! Or better yet, JUST START RUNNING NORTH RIGHT NOW AND I’LL CATCH UP!”

“Bug,” the monster growls, slashing with one of its legs at 9999 passing by and only barely missing as the drone completely underestimated its reach.

Seeing that, 36658's trembling forelegs finally start listening to it again. It points at the monster and yells in a voice pitched high with a mix of terror and anger:

"HOLY WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

"MY BOWL!"

"NO ONE ATTACKS THE SHINY BRINGER!"

"BAD SLASHY CRAWLER, BAD BAD BAD!"

Smiles in angry.

The non-stop cursing and screaming coming through the hive links is soon replaced by the rapidly approaching thudding of hooves and breaking of branches.

"WHY ARE YOU ALL STILL HE- whattheactualbuck?" dirt sprays from under 1988's forelegs as the infiltrator breaks through the treeline and takes in the fleshy chunks of matter flying from the dreamweaver under vigorous deconstruction.

"We won!" calls out 20100 as the dreamweaver stops moving.

"Yaaaay!"

"Drone power!"

"I think you're supposed to say a really witty one-liner when you win like that."

"A REALLY WITTY ONE-LINER!"

"Yeah! Just like that!"

"Woohooo!"

While 1988 stares at the hoof bumping and cheering drones, the remaining chunk of the dreamweaver's body slides back into the now clearly visible, pulsating spatial rift copying the contour of the ground.

The drones stop their celebration and look at 1988 as one, red, brown, and green gore dripping from them.

"Umm, we can totally explain *some* of this," 9999 speaks out first, "I think."

“I was trying to make that soup thingy because it smells nice but I made a swirly again instead. Dunno why,” 17070 shrugs, “Oh! And the soup pony spoke to us again and this time everyone saw her, but then the monster came out and High Score spilled the swirly...”

1988 looks directly at 9999.

“What does that drone mean by saying that you *spilled a magical portal*?! That’s not a thing! HOW DID YOU DO SOMETHING THAT’S NOT A THING?”

9999 doesn’t have a better answer than simply pointing at the rift on the ground.

“Umm, that?”

1988’s eye twitches, but then he takes a deep breath and says to himself:

“*Nevermind*. Ignore this, 1988, for the good of the hive, and sort out your priorities. That’s a different problem. We have a bigger problem,” he opens his eyes again, “We have to leave. The ponies you fled from last night can’t be more than half an hour behind me and I think I’m being generous. They have some kind of tracking magic, they might not know where exactly we are, but they can track me perfectly. I don’t know how you escaped before but they’re on their way.”

“They had other problems,” says 9999, “What do we do-”

“Changelings? Changelings?” the soup pony’s voice comes out of the rift again, making 1988’s eyes bulge before he rushes to the rift and leans over it.

“You are Princess Luna, aren’t you?” he asks.

“Yes, it’s me,” Luna nods, “I don’t know how you did it but you damaged a dreamweaver. I need your help-”

“Look, there’s a paladin and a bunch of trackers on our tail. And what do you mean by help? We attacked Canterlot and I’m sure those guys are

chasing us because of Riverside!” 1988 replies sharply.

Luna gives him a pleading stare.

“I know, but we don’t have to be enemies. I got to know two changelings who are now guests in Canterlot. One is a drone calling itself 65536 and one’s name is Fury. Her rank was... 16, I think. We don’t have to be friends immediately either, but I’m imprisoned here in the dreamscape by an entity I can’t defeat on my own. If you want a chance for peace, we can help each other!”

“How? We’re not about to just jump into a magical portal-”

“There are other changelings here already causing trouble! They’re breaking the Tantabus’ hold over the dreamweavers and weakening its influence, but if it goes too far it will stop trying to use them to break through into the real world and simply kill them.”

“156...” 1988 breathes out.

“If you know them, I can guide you to them. If there’s more of you, you might be able to weaken Tantabus enough for me to get all of us out,” Luna looks around in panic as the portal distorts, “Our time is running out. Please, help me, or if not me, help everypony, because there’s no telling how much power Tantabus will gain if it figures out how to break changeling minds as well.”

1988 grits his teeth and looks at the drones one by one.

“The hunters will keep chasing us if we flee anyway and we’re bound to run out of love eventually. 9999, did you finish the markings?”

“Yes, I did,” the drone nods.

“Then our mission is clear,” the infiltrator sounds as if he’s mostly trying to persuade himself, “We must regroup with 156- yes?” he notices 17070’s raised hoof.

“How do we know the soup pony is a friend?”

“Firstly, you heard her... through us. Secondly, the ‘soup pony’ is, in reality, pony princess Luna. I was wondering why she would contact *you* of all creatures but it seems your cooking has some weird qualities I don’t have the time nor the ability to decipher. Thirdly, she knows about 156. And finally, we’ve spent way too much time here with the pony trackers on my tail, so we’re jumping in. Let’s go!”

“Umm-”

“That is an order, *drone*,” 1988 narrows his eyes at 17070 who lowers its head between its shoulders.

The magical rift distorts again, this time for a whole second.

“Come, please, there isn’t much time, especially for your kin. The Tantabus is getting furious,” Luna’s voice comes out as choppy and distorted.

9999 grits its teeth.

“Understood,” it says, “1988, lead the way, please. None of us have your changeling abilities so it will be helpful if you could catch us on the other side... or whatever is about to happen. I’ll go last to make sure everyone gets in.”

The infiltrator fights with its changeling instinct to send a drone first into unknown territory, but he has to admit 9999’s idea has its merit.

“Fine,” 1988 dives in.

As soon as he’s gone, 9999 speaks out, its voice shaky but determined.

“Alright, everyone. This is your chance to escape!”

“Uh, what?” 36658 blinks in surprise.

“This is what you wanted - a chance to see more of the world than just tunnels. You have a chance to live a life where someone actually likes you, where you get more than scraps of love stolen by someone else. Guys, you got the ponies here to enjoy spending time with you. You’ve adapted

enough over the past days to stay here on your own. You don't need me or 1988 to maintain the hive mind. Yes, you would forget some things, but who needs long words anyway, right? You can stay here and *live*, not just exist until a high rank gets peckish. *This* is the only chance I can get for you to stay in the world of light and shinies. You thought I was the Shiny Bringer, or whatever, that I could make things better for you - this is it! You won't get another shot at this."

"You keep saying *you...*" 20100 tilts its head.

"Look," 9999 sighs, "I have no idea if there'll be a way back. I don't know if all this isn't a trap. But if it isn't then 1988 will need someone to punish for this. I hope me being there to take it will be enough to forget about you. He trusted me to stay and force you to go through in case you didn't want to, the first time a high rank trusted a drone with something important, I'm sure, but I have to do this. This is the only chance for you!"

As 9999 looks into everyone's eyes, it already knows its words are falling on deaf ears.

36658 beams, although it's clearly forced.

"Buddy, I don't think anyone here knows the right long words to thank you enough for what you're doing right now."

"Guys, you won't get another chance like-" 9999 tries to stress it one more time.

"BUT," 36658 keeps going, "You're forgetting one simple rule, High Score. You might be the Shiny Bringer now, you might see our situation from the point of view of a high rank. You're the smartest drone alive and you can think of our situation from all the difficult angles, and we all thank you for giving us this chance. But you're not staying here with us and I know why. The most basic rule applies to you too, or maybe because you're the best drone it applies to you the most. You want to help 10013, 47989, and everyone else stuck inside the wibbly with the soup princess."

"What are you talking about? *We made this entire damn religion thing up-*"

“High Score,” 36658 walks over to the portal, “The most basic rule is that *drones stick together.*”

“No, wai-” 9999 can only stand there as 36658, closely followed by Smiley, 20100, and 57999, jumps into the portal.

17070, however, is the one drone 9999 *can* catch in time.

“You’re not going, buddy,” it stands between the portal and the other drone, “Not you.”

“Why?”

“Because *they* have a chance to make it. You? You’re a dead drone walking, just like me.”

“I don’t understand,”

“If they survive whatever is in there, and if they save 156 and the others, AND if they get back home to the hive, what do you think will happen to a traitor and a deaf drone? Who do you think is the first one on the chopping block? Do you think things will get better back home now that all the ponies who know about Canterlot want to kill us? Buddy, I can let *them* go because I believe they have a chance to get back home and live a normal, short drone life. I can’t let you go because I know you’ll get eaten as disposable, probably immediately. The others were liked here, but you have a pony who genuinely loves you. You have a chance here, you don’t have a chance there.”

“But I want to help!” pleads 17070.

“You can,” 9999 looks the other drone in the eyes, “ You can help everyone who will be returning from the north, and you might be able to help the entire changeling species more than anything I’d be able to do even if I had a chance to return home.”

“How?”

“Like this...”

“M-Miss Ladle?”

The cook turns away from the cauldron when she hears the squeaky and uneven voice of the deaf drone.

“What’s wrong?!” she immediately forgets everything when she sees 17070 standing there, trembling with tears streaming from its eyes. What’s worse, when she goes in to give it a hug, the drone backs off.

“I- I need to tell you something important first... and you’re not going to like it... but High Score said it would help us in the long run and it’s the Shiny Bringer so it knows best,” 17070 snuffles, “You know about this place called Canterlot? A big white city on the side of a mountain that’s full of shinies. A few weeks ago...”

Author's Notes:

And that's the end of the lumber camp. What happens next with 17070 or the group that went north to return the cocoons? We might never know.

Next up - did you really think 65536's story would end by saving 1313?

65536: 18

Keep your head up. Don't nod off again. Don't nod off again. Keep looking straight. Don't drop the pokey stick.

65536 closes its eyes to blink.

“Tired?” Pink Sunset’s voice wakes the drone up.

“Huh?” 65536’s head bobs upwards, “Oh holes. Did I do it again?”

“You did,” the Nightguard on the other side of the door to Luna’s suite nods, “Is there a problem? I’m not going to keep you here if you’re about to drop but I still have to tell the Commander.”

“No. It’s just-” 65536 sighs.

Tell it straight, 65536. You won't get eaten or recycled here. This isn't home-the hive.

“-that this isn’t what we drones ever did, what we’re made to do.”

“Being a guard? *You* were the one who wanted to join for real no matter what.”

“No no no, I enjoyed helping 1313 and I like all the armor maint- mount-fixing, but... just standing and looking in one direction isn’t what drones ever do. Sorry,” 65536 lowers its head.

“I know you can go three days and nights with no sleep without even slowing down. Why would standing guard exhaust you so much?” Pink Sunset asks with no anger and all curiosity. It genuinely doesn’t make sense considering how much energy 65536 normally has when assisting one of the Nightguards.

“I’m not... tired,” 65536 rubs its head, “I’ve got enough love. I just keep falling asleep for no reason. It’s... it’s like everything is telling me to not waste love when there’s nothing to do.”

“So you never just... chilled out back in the hive?”

“Oh yeah, some deeper tunnels were chilly. Holes, I know of crevasses that were frozen over,” 65536 shakes its head.

“That’s not what I meant. Did you never have time to just do what you want or relax?”

“Umm... no? I mean, sometimes when we managed to finish a tunnel a bit earlier and if we found something interesting we did some quick trading but then we simply went to sleep to save energy until we got more orders.”

“Oh...” Pink Sunset blinks in surprise. Over his time with 65536 he *did* get the idea that drones weren’t allowed much individuality but he simply couldn’t grasp what was, in essence, the life of a tool... a hammer - to be simply put away until next use. Now it finally hits, “Ohhh... I think I understand now. I saw something similar when I worked alongside mercenaries. Hay, I’m sure that a few of the emergency hires that the Royal Guard got are having a similar problem. Your body is simply used to a completely different regime and activities.”

“I guess,” 65536 shrugs, “We’re hatched to dig, carry, and sleep. That’s all.”

“Yep, and when there’s nothing to do you just go to sleep on reflex,” Pink nods.

“Does that make me a bad guard?” asks 65536, its ears poking through the holes in the helmet splay back.

“Certainly not. You’ll either get used to these postings with time or we have to find something better suited for you. How about you go patrol the Nightguard floors instead? Some walking might do you good.”

“On it!” 65536 salutes and starts walking.

“A-hem!” Pink clears his throat loudly, “You are still supposed to report anything out of the ordinary that you see. I’ll ask you some questions afterwards and let’s see how many details you can catch.”

“Yes, sir!”

Sounds like fun!

With as serious and official expression as 65536 can muster, which is still probably the most excited look coupled with the happiest smile a normal pony would ever see on any creature, the drone patrols the upper floors of the castle, its head turning from side to side to catch *all the details*.

A unicorn maid walking through the top floor with a basket containing a stack of sheets folded on her back doesn’t escape the drone’s keen eye.

“Good morning, Miss!” 65536 beams at her.

“Good m-” she replies automatically before her brain catches up with the situation. She stops, looks down at the drone, and furrows her brows, “Aah, a monster!”

“Where?!” 65536 hops backwards, looking around and waving its half-sized spear in a vague forwards direction.

“You!”

“Me?” 65536 blinks, “Oh... oooohhh...” the drone nods in understanding, “I’m a Nightguard, Miss, and I’m here to show that we changelings can be friendly too despite... you know...” 65536 shakes its head, perks up, and beams at the mare who twitches at the sight of all the teeth, “Anyway, if you see a real monster, just call and I’ll poke it with this sharp stick I got,” the drone stabs the empty air with its spear.

“The Nightguards let a monster into the castle and armed it...” she mutters in stunned disbelief.

“I have this badge as well as a little card from Princess Celestia somewhere,” 65536 taps the Nightguard badge on his armor before starting to fiddle with a pouch hanging around its neck, “It’s full of official words and a sun picture and covered in something tough so that I don’t accidentally smoosh it. I think it’s called lemonaded paper or someth-”

The mare breaks into a gallop and disappears up the nearest staircase.

“Awww... and I tried so hard,” mumbles 65536 to itself before resuming the patrol, “Keep your chin up, 65536, Mister Sharp said it would be like this for some time but it’ll get better if you keep trying.”

Despite the servant’s reaction and its enthusiasm being drastically dampened, 65536 remains aware of its objective and stays vigilant in order to report anything unusual to Pink Sunset when its patrol is done.

This means that a door opening right in front of it and revealing Sharp Biscuit limping out of his office with a bleary stare can’t surprise 65536 at all.

“Good morning, Commander Biscuit!” the drone greets him in a chipper tone followed by a salute.

“Morning, recruit,” Sharp yawns, “Why aren’t you at your post?”

“I kept nodding off because I’m not used to standing around and doing nothing and Mister Sunset said that I should patrol around and that there would be a test of everything I noticed afterwards. This is so much better!”

“Noting that for further postings,” Sharp nods, walks over to the nearest window, “Huh... it’s already *this* late? I guess it’s another day up in the barracks instead of a bed back home,” he sighs.

“Too much paperwork again?”

“Yes,” Sharp nods, “Another night, another... report.”

“You usually do it when something bad happens...” 65536 leaves the sentence hanging, “Something related to... us?”

Sharp gives 65536 a tired look.

“It’s okay, 65536. You don’t need to know everything.”

“But if we caused it-”

“*You* didn’t cause anything,” Sharp says sternly, “That’s why you don’t need to know the... rather graphic details. I don’t want you to blame yourself for something you had no control over.”

“I just want to help...” 65536 lowers its head, “But the ponies keep running away like the maid a while ago.”

“You *are*, recruit. You are,” Sharp forces a smile, “And what was that about a maid? Walk and talk.”

As 65536 accompanies Sharp on his way up to the Nightguard barracks, the drone describes the maid encounter to him. When it’s done, Sharp scratches 65536 under its chin, the only reachable unarmored spot.

“That’s why I like you, 65536. You’re a fighter.”

“I’m a drone, not a warrior. I mean, we kinda, umm, all saw it when I tried to do the physical test before joining your guards for real.”

“That’s why I chose the word I used, 65536, a *fighter*,” Sharp stops by a window and looks at waking Canterlot sparkling in the rays of the morning sun, “There’s much more to fighting than hitting things. Not everypony can punch things but they can be a fighter.”

“I don’t understand,” 65536 flies up on the windowsill to sit next to Sharp’s head.

“I believe a fighter is anypony who is trying to make things better in any way. Anypony who doesn’t simply roll on the couch after a day of work and wait for tomorrow. Anypony who does as little as call for help when they

see somepony in trouble instead of walking past and thinking that's not their problem," Sharp's smile grows a little bit more genuine as he looks into 65536's eyes and taps its helmet, "Anypony who keeps *trying*," he repeats, "And I think you fit that category rather w-aaaaugh," Sharp can't stop a loud yawn, "Ooof, I think I should go before I fall asleep on my hooves. Don't worry about not doing enough, 65536, you're making things better just by being visible and friendly, or at least polite."

65536 hops on the floor and salutes the Commander who salutes back.

"Oh, and one more thing. A little tip," Sharp adds, "Pink is a very smart pony, so if he's about to give you a test of what you noticed on your patrol, he'll find something to ask about which you wouldn't normally look at."

65536 turns its head several times before looking at Sharp again.

As a response, the Commander only points upwards before turning around and walking away.

Huuh... how many times did I really look up? These hallways are so high.

Be seen, be polite, be nice if they're not too afraid.

Later that day, off-duty 65536 is strolling around Canterlot castle grounds, having a look at Royal Guard training, no armor or anything. It's simply there to be seen.

And it gets exactly that when Princess Celestia passes by, curious about the drone watching the guard training.

"Good afternoon, 65536."

"Hi, Princess!" 65536 salutes, "Wait, no, I'm off duty," it lowers its leg and gives the princess a little bow instead.

"No need for court etiquette between friends," Celestia chuckles, "How are things? I haven't seen you since you and the Nightguards saved that

changeling friend of yours.”

“I scared a maid lady earlier, so now I’m just trying to let ponies know I’m not a threat,” replies 65536, “Commander Sharp said it would help eventually.”

“He would know,” Celestia nods, “Two years ago, batponies went through a similar thing after Luna’s return.”

“Huh? What happened? Where did Luna return from?”

Celestia pauses before smiling at the drone.

“That’s too long of a story to recount right now. I’m just taking a short break from court proceedings before I head back.”

“Speaking of Luna,” 65536 peeps after a moment, already expecting the answer but still having to try, “She still isn’t back. Is there really no way for us to help? I mean, when we saved 1313 we broke into this weird world with eyes in the sky and blood and spooky things everywhere.”

“Come on, we’ve been over this,” Celestia sighs, “You broke into a pocket dimension within the real world, this is so completely different that I don’t even know how to *begin* explaining it to somepony who knows nothing of magic. Simply put, the dreamscape works differently, and while your consciousness can get there when you’re sleeping, getting there as a physical presence and being able to meaningfully affect it is extremely difficult,” Celestia chuckles, “Luna tried to teach me, you know, when she was still worried of how other ponies would see her after her return. She even wrote a book of notes made specifically for somepony like me.”

“What color was it? I bet it was an important color like, umm, bright purple!”

“Uhh, no,” Celestia blinks in surprise, “Why would bright purple be important?”

“Have you ever seen a bright purple drone?”

“Purple dr-? Awwww,” Celestia hugs 65536 for quite a while after that, “No, no no. Luna turned the book white with a sun on the cover so that I could come and find it easily whenever I had time. Alas, even after learning how to enter the dreamscape, I immediately got stuck and Luna had to come get me. That’s why it’s dangerous for a pony like me and that’s why I can’t simply go there to help Luna.”

“A pony like you?” 65536 tilts its head. With a conspiratorial wink, Celestia leans over to 65536’s ear and whispers:

“I’m not that good with magic.”

65536 gasps.

“How come?”

“It’s an alicorn thing. Some alicorns have a different kind of power which makes using complex magic too difficult. Think of it as having to concentrate with somepony constantly playing overly loud music inside your head. That’s me and magic. Luna’s divine aspect is much weaker so she doesn’t suffer from such interference and can do great magic. In fact, Luna is likely the second best magic user alive.”

“Wooooow. Who’s the best?”

“Luna’s old magic teacher, Scream, hooves down,” Celestia looks up into the sky.

“Could she help if she’s so good?”

“She probably could, if she’s still alive, even without Luna’s inborn connection to dreams, but she wouldn’t...”

“What? Why?”

“That’s a much longer story than about Luna’s ex- return. In short, she fell in love with a monster that I had to stop and she never forgave me for it.”

“Was there no other way? I mean, ponies keep calling me a monster and... well, I’m just me.”

Celestia pulls 65536 into a hug.

“As much damage as you caused, I can understand why your queen did what she did. Besides, you’re doing all you can to fix things. Scream’s... lover just... killed and killed and killed destroyed civilizations, and nearly ended all life on this planet before he stopped. He was a true monster, and he can’t be allowed to exist in this world ever again.”

“Your Highness, it’s time,” a Royal Guard belonging to a group standing a short distance away on a gravel path approaches the two.

Celestia sighs but stands up with a smile.

“The work never ends. Thanks for the chat, 65536. Feel free to visit me in the evening, you’re a pleasant company. You can show me your newest drawings or something.”

“Sure thing, Your Princessness!”

The confused Royal Guards look from Celestia to the changeling, and once they start walking away, she turns her head back to it and winks.

The door opens in front of 65536 and, just for a moment, its legs turn to jelly. Facing a high rank has never been easy. Facing a top rank... probably never will.

“I can *feel* you staring,” Fury rolls her eyes, “You coming inside or not? Damn it, such a classic innuendo and still completely lost on a drone. Life is suffering,” she closes the door after she hears 65536 walk into the room. As the silence lengthens, Fury walks over to the spot where she last heard 65536 and pats the area with her foreleg until she touches the drone’s head, “What’s wrong?”

“I want to help Luna.”

“And I want my eyes to work,” Fury shrugs.

“I think I’ve figured out how, but it might go super wrong for me or make some ponies really mad,” says 65536 in a hesitant tone, “It might even make things worse. I don’t want that but I can’t just sit here and wait. Something is wrong, I can *feel* it.”

Fury walks over to an armchair by the open window, sits down, and lets the warm wind play with her mane.

“Are you here just to tell me that?”

“No,” 65536 sighs, “You’re a top rank. You always know what to do.”

“When everything fails, it’s back to the hive hierarchy, eh?” Fury sneers, “Buddy, we know shit. That’s the main thing this failed invasion taught me. We know shit, Chrysalis knew shit, and when the higher ranks who knew shit failed, we ate shit. The only one who didn’t was the one responsible, because she always stood on the backs of all of us.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand. I’m just a drone.”

“No. You’re a changeling,” Fury snarls 65536’s way in a tone that makes it tremble, “You’re a member of the perfect species. You can shoot magic beams from your forehead, you can outfly a pegasus, you can outmuscle an earth pony, and you kick so much ass that Celestia’s chair would scream in terror.”

The tiniest spark of insight tells 65536 that Fury might not be talking *entirely* to it. Unfortunately, it doesn’t give any hint as to what to do.

“Miss Fury?”

“*Changeling*, I helped ponies escape from right under Chrysalis’ nose. I looked her in the eyes -well, in her general direction- and mind blasted her in front of her cohorts. I defied her, I humiliated her in front of all the survivors she managed to gather, and I got away with it. Then I got here and

stared down -again, in a manner of speaking- both Celestia and Luna. Do you know why?”

“Nu uh.”

“I’m not going to lie that it was for the greater good or something. It was for myself. I wanted to keep the pony who liked me despite knowing everything I did and who I was. No overhyped failure of a monarch would steal that from me. Now I’m here and he loves me more thanks to what we went through. How long will that last? No idea. From what I know, our species never had any stability, and it might just be the case that Crest will get annoyed or bored with me in a year or two and I’ll still be blind. I might die on the streets or I might have to join a brothel and get poisoned due to only feeding on lust. And you know what? I don’t regret anything. I can’t change what happened. All I can do is admit my mistakes and blame my decisions only on myself. There’s always a choice, 36658, but creatures often pretend there isn’t one because they aren’t able to accept the risks. If you want to do something to save Luna that would make others angry or even kill you, then that’s the risk. Take it or leave it.”

“You know, you’re really nice for a high rank,” says 65536 after a moment of silence.

Just like that, the serious moment is gone.

“Nice? *Nice?!* ” Fury huffs, “No, I’m tough as nails and hard as steel! Nice? Noooooo, I’m meltiiiiiiing!” she paws at her face, gurgling.

Chuckling, 65536 hops into her lap to check that she’s really just messing around before being unceremoniously shoved down with some force. A tumble like that is nothing, so when it picks itself up, still grinning, it says:

“Thank you. And in case I... in case I muck up too badly-”

“Bring Luna back. That’s an order.”

For some reason that *does* make things easier.

“Okay. Blue, you watch the door. Not-Blue, you’re with me for moral support.”

It’s surprisingly easy to find the only white book filled with hoofwriting and symbols on the shelves of Luna’s bedside library. By now, 65536 can skim it to get the basic gist of where to begin, namely roughly two thirds into it where Luna writes:

“The complexity of using magic to enter the dreamscape stems mainly from how difficult it is to draw the correct types of energy from oneself and the world around. However, if one already has the required amount of homogenic power inside them, then what’s required is only the right focusing catalyst which would transform the homogenic energy passing through it. This means that any source of energy might be enough to create the portal, not only divinity. So, if Celestia can’t concentrate to perform the complex transformation then all I have to do is create the correct catalyst. An item of sorts? A magical circle? A ritual?”

What follows is a section of pages with numerous small pictures and descriptions crossed out until 65536’s eyes stop on pages where the incredibly complex pictures and designs stop being crossed out and start taking entire pages. The new chapter is titled:

“Working magical circle bases. Required materials. Permutations to achieve simple customisations.”

“Any homoerotic energy means love too, right?” mutters 65536 to itself, “And I’ve got plenty.”

Author's Notes:

How to be accidentally absolutely correct.

CH: 13/13 - Wistful

“If there is someone I would ever ask for forgiveness it would be *my* own daughter, not you, you spineless-”

The hive mind freezes, taking Wistful and Chrysalis away mid-word.

To Chrysalis’ surprise, while she doesn’t know the richly decorated room she lands in, it is beyond familiar. The white walls, the high ceiling, the round table in its center with various ponies of the main three tribes sitting at it. If one switched the torches and candles for electric and magical lamps, Chrysalis could swear she ended up in modern day Canterlot castle. If she still had full access to the castle plans stored inside the hive mind and a chance to look out of the window, she could likely figure out which exact room she’s in.

Everyone is frozen in time.

“This was the only thing I could do to buy us some time,” she hears Wistful’s real voice behind her, “I won’t be able to hide us in this memory for long, though, and then we’ll both return and...”

“I can’t defeat her,” admits Chrysalis, turning around, “I thought that I could overpower her with the knowledge of the other queens, but I can’t even touch her.”

“That’s the flutterpony mind at work. If we were still a species, we would be the worst enemy of changeling mental abilities.”

“If the flutterponies were this powerful, why even bother turning you into... us?”

“You misunderstood me. We could only soothe, listen, protect ourselves, and analyze. We couldn’t attack, break somepony down, or manipulate

them. All those avenues opened for us with the fate-changing dark magic,” Wistful walks over to the central table with a large map rolled out on it.

It’s exactly like when she lived through the memory of the griffon war council. Chrysalis pushes between a unicorn wearing heavy armor and a pegasus in a much lighter one made of leather. Romane, probably? Her personal memory is a bit rusty. Relying so much on the collective hive mind can be both a blessing and a curse.

With Wistful leaning over the map across the table from her, she examines the pony and griffon miniatures made from wood or crystals.

“This was my first visit to Canterlot as a citizen of Equestria, although I’ve met with Celestia and her ambassadors several times before,” Wistful sighs, tapping his hoof on the map - a small dot on the coast covered in griffon figurines, “Griffon beachhead which they managed to establish after weeks of brutal fighting. With the standard scrying spells suddenly failing, ponies weren’t prepared for such a quick strike at all.”

Chrysalis adds what little she’s learned so far.

“Scream gave the griffons the knowledge of istrium. The same substance my throne is made of, although my throne negates all magic, not just long-distance scrying and communication. From other memories I saw, unicorns were perfectly able to use offensive magic in battle. I wonder why.”

Wistful shrugs.

“I don’t know anything about that. I was just a chieftain of a small tribe that ponies which Equestrians discovered while looking for faster and safer supply routes to the front lines through the Everfree. In my time, the Everfree forest spanned the majority of eastern Equestria, as dangerous as today or maybe even more, but we were safe from the creatures living there thanks to our psychic abilities. At first, we only helped ponies pass through the forest, hoping that the war would be over quickly, but then unicorns started studying us and learned some features of our mental links.”

“I get that you were roped into a war thanks to it, but there must be a big string of god awful decisions between protecting supply caravans from wildlife and being irrevocably turned into an entirely different species of hive-structured murder monsters. Holes, even our breeding cycle is completely different from normal ponies.”

“The transformation spell was supposed to be reversible...” mutters Wistful.

“What? I mean, that actually makes sense, but the memories I saw all felt as if it was final.”

“Starswirl, a powerful unicorn and Celestia’s personal friend, designed the spell and tested it on me first to see if we were compatible or if it wouldn’t fail in some terrible way. I was already a changeling for days before I gathered everypony- almost everypony, but I couldn’t let them know the drawbacks. Well, it’s not as if I knew many of those myself at the time. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time to deliberate. The griffons launched a large-scale offensive which the ponies only temporarily halted by a tactical spell strike which reduced a part of their army into radioactive ash along with a massive stretch of land.”

“That’s how the Badlands were created, right?”

Wistful shakes his head.

“That was only the first strike out of three, each closer and closer to our home as the griffons kept progressing in smaller units and regrouping whenever ponies tried to stop them again. But yes, eventually the whole area earned its name, because nothing would be able to adapt to living there for centuries. Almost nothing, as you know. To avoid turning more of Equestria into a scorched hellscape, I agreed to the transformation. Say what you will, but after the tide of war turned thanks to us and unicorns gained the forward positions from which they could nuke the Empire, I knew I was right.”

“They started it...” grumbles Chrysalis, “Scream or not.”

“To this day -well, to the days of the Great Changeling Empire which was the last time we were getting information from the griffon lands- there were massive stretches of silver deserts. Dozens of ‘Badlands’ that ponies created by wiping out major cities, all still uninhabitable nearly a millennium later. That’s what Equestria would have been if it weren’t for us - a crater of ash and dust filled with pony skeletons.”

“My plan was to go through the full memories of all queens to figure out what was true and what they only believed, and you’d be no different-” Chrysalis freezes, “Fuck... is that the price? All our history and knowledge?”

“What?” Wistful tilts his head.

“I think I understand what I must do to stop Shroud. I might not be able to affect *her*, but...” she sighs, “Tell me, what happened with the reversible spell then?”

“It didn’t work, simple as that. Starswirl tried it on my friend and bodyguard Twinkleshine several days later,” a memory of Wistful and presumably Twinkleshine, fairly similar to the mass transformation in the flutterpony village that Shroud had her live through earlier, flashes through Chrysalis’ mind, “He volunteered so that nothing bad would happen to me so shortly after the original transformation. Starswirl said it had something to do with changing pony cutie marks, but we didn’t have those anymore so the spell needed altering. When I spread the transformation to others, I knew there wasn’t a way back, but I wasn’t reaching too far by hoping there soon would be.”

“Even I know the name Starswirl the Bearded,” replies Chrysalis, “I saw him in memories of queens who came later. What happened that prevented him from creating a counterspell?”

“After the war, it stopped being a priority. Starswirl was sent to the northern mountains where ponies discovered istrium in order to research it so that a war like that couldn’t happen again. It wasn’t a big deal because everypony knew about us and what we did, so even if we looked scary we were the same ponies. We were saviors and heroes.”

“Still waiting for the bad news...”

“Starswirl didn’t return during my lifetime, and no other unicorn was able to figure out how the original transformation spell worked. A pony generation passed, and our heroism was forgotten. Court politics was the main cause, as *some nobles* wanted to rule Equestria instead of Celestia and started portraying us as her tools for killing political opponents, or worse. As time passed, more and more ponies grew to believe that we were just monsters, and transforming into ponies wasn’t particularly helpful due to how love usually weakens over time, especially with the side effects of our feeding. You know the rest, you know why all the other queens failed at farming ponies for love, and you know how this story ends.”

“Hmmm,” is Chrysalis’ only reaction, “Makes me wonder why the flutterponies were the ones singled out for transformation.”

“I don’t know.”

“And *that* is a lie,” she glares at him.

“Does it matter?” Wistful look away, “We are what we are now. Well, you are what you are and I am what I am.”

“Yes, a bigger difference than you or Shroud understand,” a devious smirk graces Chrysalis’ lips for a moment, “If you can’t make memories work properly,” she nods to the motionless gathering around them, “then I think you can bring us back.”

“-coward!” Shroud finishes her statement.

As if nothing just happened, Wistful only sighs, replying:

“You don’t know how the war started, Misty. You don’t know how close the danger was when we joined Equestria.”

“Oh shut it! You sold us all out to get to fuck Celestia,” Shroud rolls her eyes, “Which you did, so I hope that ass was worth it.”

“Look, I can show you-”

“I’m not here to hear your excuses.”

With only a flick of her horn announcing a similar telekinetic blast that all but disintegrated high rank changelings during her fight against Haze, Wistful tumbles on the ground and starts coughing out blood.

“...then... what do you... really want...?” Chrysalis groans, pushing herself into a sitting position as her voice gets steadier, “To kill *Scream*? You *know* you can’t do it. You *lived* through her schemes, and even I understood from what I saw in everyone’s memories, that the main reason she caused all the tragedy was to make Celestia suffer because killing her outright wouldn’t be enough, not because it would be impossible.”

“She should have done that *herself* if she’s that powerful!” retorts Shroud, eyes burning with now too familiar rage.

“You don’t even understand... basic infiltration and manipulation. That’s what separates us,” Chrysalis makes the effort to stand up, “You think like a warrior, no matter what you believe. You were made to win a war through intelligence gathering and precise assassinations, but that’s still a thing a warrior can do. You’re not a changeling, *Misty*, you’re a transformed flutterpony, so you don’t understand what we are now. I can easily see what *Scream* wanted to do. I know how to torture a mind and make it turn against itself, and not having a clear enemy when everything is going wrong around you is so elementary it hurts. If *Scream* openly obliterated Celestia’s every project, then Sunbutt would only get stronger and more focused against a visible threat. And we? We were just the most convenient tool for the job. So think again - what do you really want? To wipe out or enslave ponies? Others tried and you know how that ends even if you win. Is it really to kill *Scream*? How? Alone? Or with a hive of starved wretches? She will eradicate all of you without even raising a hoof.”

“First,” Shroud teleports over to Wistful, one foreleg raised over his head, “I want to finally see justice served for a genocide.”

“Misty n-”

Crunch!

Shroud kicks her leg to get rid of the gore as she turns towards Chrysalis gritting her teeth.

“Oh, did you want more knowledge?” she laughs, “More excuses about how he had to do what he did? More of our pre-transformation history?” Shroud shapeshifts her hoof into a set of claws with which she grabs Chrysalis’ chin, “All this time you were looking for *me*, so here I am.”

“I want... freedom,” hisses Chrysalis, “No more queens sitting in the hive mind and draining the entire hive. No more you driving everyone crazy.”

“Heh,” Shroud smirks, “You know what? I wholeheartedly agree. With the traitor gone from you, there’s no one else I can’t find. Not even the flutterponies still surviving right under your nose. Now I just have to find the core of the hive mind in case they survived and destroy whoever is their new host.”

“And then?” Chrysalis’s horn flares up only for a fraction of a second before Shroud’s telekinesis slams her into the ground and the glow weakens into only the faintest shimmer.

“Then, finally, we can rebuild an independent species. Scream can go fuck herself, Celestia can go fuck herself, the griffons will be reminded not to mess with us, and-”

Shroud raises her foreleg to look at her slowly disintegrating hoof with a stare of pure horror.

“-what?” the word leaves her mouth alongside a cloud of dust.

“Everything you want to do,” Chrysalis spits out a wad of blood, “would work if we already had territory and *any* level of safety. And even in that case there were at least three different old queens who could do it *way* better.”

With a growl, Shroud takes a step towards Chrysalis, and her foreleg breaks under her, making her collapse on the ground.

“How are you doing this, weakling?!”

“I can’t attack you directly, but you’re still inside my body, inside every cell that forms my connection to the hive mind, and I am a real changeling, unlike you,” Chrysalis looks down at Shroud with a scowl, “It sucks that our history must disappear in order to get rid of you. All the memories I gained from the other queens I wanted to fully examine later. All the changeling tricks I wanted to learn. All the power I could have gained from their knowledge. Everything, unfortunately, must go.”

“You can’t do that,” Shroud snarls, “Stronger queens than you tried and failed. This is just another trick, and I *will* get through it!”

“Yes, and unlike all of them I’m finally ready and able to sacrifice everything the hive mind offers. This time, you will truly be just a memory inside my brain, not a living entity hiding in our collective mind. After today, the known history of changelings will begin with *me*.”

“You. Physically. Can’t. Do. That,” Shroud grits her teeth which crumble in her mouth.

“No, *you* can’t do that. With all this, you made me understand why you never simply escaped into a powerful changeling after overwriting their mind when you could have touched and influenced so many over your lifetime,” Chrysalis looks down at Shroud, “You never truly accepted what your father did to you, *Misty*. You never wanted to become what changelings ‘*degenerated*’ into over the centuries,” Chrysalis spits on her, “Unlike you, I understand what we are, and I *can* control my body on a level you never bothered to learn. And trust me when I say - we didn’t degenerate, we became more than you could have ever imagined.”

Chrysalis’ horn flares up again and the queen screams in agony as the final stage of the burning process targeting nerves all over her body including her brain starts. No shared knowledge will remain, for some time, only direct hive links.

Next time doing something like this, shut off the pain center beforehoof.

Retain only the part of the brain that controls shapeshifting and the parts with your own memories.

And now start searching, cell after cell. She'll grow weaker with every correct nerve severed.

You're completely isolated from other changelings, so you have the time.

Do I have the love, though? We'll see.

How much time passes in relation to the real world? No one knows.

No matter what Shroud tries, she can't move. What's worse, she can feel her own memories trickling away.

Infinity passes.

Eventually, Chrysalis stops screaming, chuckles through her bleeding throat when her hazy vision stabilizes, and looks at...

"I had a feeling that this would be the memory you'd hold on to until the end," to her own surprise, the queen smiles at the young flutterpony in front of her, "I guess Wistful got what he deserved from a foal soldier he created."

Before vanishing completely, Misty looks Chrysalis in the eyes, and a forced vision crosses the queen's mind - thousands of Silents and drones slamming against the protective shield surrounding Canterlot followed by their broken bodies sliding down and piling under the mountain, all while the queen, the warriors, and the infiltrators watch the cracks inside the barrier spread.

"Hrmph!" huffs Chrysalis and wakes up.

Withered to the point of looking like a skeleton with black rubber bodysuit draped over it, broken, and completely alone, Chrysalis opens her eyes inside the pitch darkness of her cocoon.

“Anyone?” she mentally calls out, not really expecting an answer. After all, the cocoon surrounding her was made specifically for this situation.

She tries to bang on it but barely manages to move her foreleg enough to scrape it against the green surface.

“...your queen is back...” she croaks in a barely audible whisper.

She made a mistake.

Living inside her illusion of absolute power for so long, she never imagined the option of losing it.

“...damn it...”

She specifically reinforced the cocoon against it, but she *might* be able to absorb the love she used to make it. Eventually. If she doesn’t die from the effort.

“...heh... makes sense... that the only queen... badass enough... to stop me... would be... me...”

Sudden burst of light blinds her.

Dryly blinking away the shock because she can’t even produce tears, her mind gets flooded by information.

- > *18 drones died of their wounds.*
- > *21 warriors lost to natural hazards while protecting infiltrators on their way to gather love.*
- > *4 infiltrators never returned from assignments.*
- > *Remaining changelings: 186*
- > *Elapsed time...*

She was stuck inside the cocoon for *weeks*, living lifetimes' worth of changeling experience and reconstructing her own body. Everything other than her own memories is gone, forgotten forever.

Normally, the death toll would be within hive standards, but this is now the entirety of the hive. Her hive.

A small hoof clearly belonging to a *drone* which pierced the cocoon moves down to cut it open completely, revealing a warrior holding the drone up and using it like a knife.

She stumbles out of the cocoon, immediately getting caught by 68 as 96 lowers the drone staring at her with eyes wide open. Reaching out to the drone, which winces and lowers its head, she gives it a weak pat on the head.

“...good job...”

Talking hurts. The following throbbing headache as she tries to speak up mentally isn't much better but it's still a step up.

“Let's salvage what we still can.”

Author's Notes:

Aaand that's it for Chrysalis. I tried to avoid any major lore mess-up while adding a little bit here and there, but I don't have that much of an intention to write something entirely focused on the original griffon-pony wars to fully encapsulate the severity of the situation. As pretty much everyone agreed on, I should have completely avoided anything Chrysalis-related in this story, but at least it's over and hopefully wasn't completely wasted.

Anyway, next up - the classic Marvel third act finale: The big bad boss with a giant soulless CGI army fighting the good guys, all coupled with a giant sky beam.

Finale: 1/3

Author's Notes:

The finale turned out to be much longer than I wanted it to, so I'm splitting it into 3 parts. It's easier to read and it allows me to deal with potential issues someone might point out in the comments. All 3 will be published during this week.

Invisible again, 156 finds herself inside a well-lit underground tunnel ending in a T-section in the middle of which stands a closed door with two strange-looking changelings, one by each side. To her infiltrator eyes, there are dozens of tiny inconsistencies between her idea of a hive warrior and the duo, and yet they definitely are changelings, albeit even more different than those whom she saw in 387's last memory. Their carapace isn't as smooth, it's dark green instead of pitch black, their eyes look like pony ones, they have two antennae instead of a horn on top of their heads and, most of all, they're in the middle of a lively chat instead of standing and properly watching their surroundings.

Tantabus is nowhere to be found and her hive link to 387 keeps pointing at one of the door guards.

“-with Starbright now working alongside unicorns in Withering Marshes,” he says, “They’re suffering serious headaches after having to dry out such a big stretch of land day after day.”

“It’s always great to see one of ours find their place these days. Canterlot has been a bit... inhospitable lately,” the other changeling shakes his head.

“Wistful takes it up with the council of nobles each time he’s in Canterlot,” 387 frowns, “but every time the newspapers publish another ‘anonymous story’ about anything bad happening to anypony within the same postcode

where somepony even saw a changeling that week, it gets worse. Honestly, I wish Princess Celestia would put her hoof down regarding this nonsense and at least force the papers to do some investigating instead of just blindly printing any nonsense they can get their hooves on, but I can already see the headlines about her suppressing free speech due to changeling influence on the throne,” he rolls his eyes, “Basic damn fact-checking, seriously.”

“Yellow journalism,” the other changeling shakes his head, “The worst enemy of the truth. Speaking of newspapers, any news about Quiet Whisper? All I’ve been getting down in the south for the past three months were the usual reports about zebra unrest overseas. The flow of terrified refugees to take care of was never ending with less and less love to get from the ponies...”

“She just finished a fantastic piece regarding corruption in Cloudsdale. Obviously, there was a lot of pushback, but her sourcing was impeccable and the pegasi have this tendency to solve issues of corrupt city officials in a rather *definitive* manner. Think defenestration, but with broken wings, a boulder tied around one’s neck, in front of their family, and from the height of a cloud. A lot of time to think about one’s shady deals on the way down,” 387 snickers, “I’m not big on this level of brutality but I have to admit that it sends a message.”

“Makes me think we could use a little bit of cleaning up oursel-” the other guard opens his mouth to say something more but is interrupted by a female changeling figure soundlessly appearing from the tunnel bend ahead. She has long, flowing, grey mane, and her white eyes are locked on the door. Both 387 and the other give her a friendly nod.

She’s nervous.

“Hello, Misty.”

“Twinkleshine, Merryweather,” she nods back at both of them, “Is my father in?”

“Yes, he is,” Merryweather nods towards the door and lets Misty inside before closing it and...

...locking the door behind her.

“What was that for?” 387, or Twinkleshine, raises an eyebrow.

“Give them some time,” Merryweather shrugs, and the timber of his voice tells 156 immediately that there’s more and that 387 wouldn’t like it, “Misty spent the last year visiting changelings all around Equestria to see how we were doing while Wistful was doing politics in Canterlot with nobility. As I was saying, perhaps it’s time for *us* to have a chat about corruption of leadership.”

“Come on, I’ve been in Canterlot a bunch of times,” 387 rolls his eyes, “It’s not as if Wistful isn’t fighting for us, we just have too little influence these days.”

“And that’s about to change,” Merryweather suddenly jumps at 387, knocking him down in a moment of surprise, “Sorry, buddy, but you’ll understand soon.”

156 senses a wave of mental pain hit both 387 and Merryweather and hears a scream from behind the door. 387 recovers first, twists on the floor, and manages to kick Merryweather off of himself before punching him in the head, unlocking the door with his key, and entering a smooth cavern furnished in a mix of furniture belonging to a study, a living room, and an office.

“Misty...” 387’s jaw drops open when he sees Misty standing over the body of another moss green changeling with his throat slit so wide his head is almost gone. The shock drains quickly, replaced by burning rage as 387 charges at her, “I will see you in jail for this!”

“Hmph,” Misty just gives him a somehow even more furious glare followed by a mental burst of agony that knocks 387 down on the floor and makes even 156 drop to her knees, “While you and this *disgrace* were parading yourselves in Canterlot, I travelled around to see what state we are in. I met with changelings starving in the streets, whoring themselves for food, or pushed into ghettos. What you’re feeling now is *their* pain, and I won’t allow this to continue. I’m letting you live, Twinkleshit, because you’re just

his friend and I saw you only doing your job while he was getting blown by his alicorn slut. However, you should reconsider whether your loyalty lies with a corrupt leader or with the rest of your species.”

As 387 starts crawling on the floor towards Wistful, Misty leaves without another word.

“I failed you...” he tries to cover the neck wound with his hooves but it’s obviously completely pointless.

At that point, 156 finally senses the presence of Tantabus nearby and understands what she has to do. Whatever 387 really is, he can sense, understand, soothe, and bring peace, but she’s an infiltrator. She schemes, controls, and manipulates. That doesn’t always have to be a bad thing.

As Wistful gurgles and gasps for air, dying under 387’s hooves, 156 leans over him and whispers as quietly as she can while mimicking the voice of a stallion she never heard based on 387’s and Merryweather’s conversation:

“...I believe in you, you can help everypony find a better tomorrow...”

Strangely enough, 156 believes it herself.

The memory shatters around her, sending her tumbling through darkness. When reality stabilizes, she finds herself standing on a hill overlooking a lush valley. 387, with tears in his eyes, is standing in front of her, staring upwards at the massive, starry form of Tantabus towering in the middle of the valley and looking down at them with a sharp-toothed, wide smile.

“I WAS WONDERING HOW THIS *FAILURE* KEPT RESISTING,”

Its voice booms over the countryside,

“SO I GUESS I HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO KILL YOU, BUT DOING IT MYSELF WOULD BE TOO QUICK. BESIDES, LET’S GIVE THAT HOPELESS TERROR ONE FINAL CHANCE TO

**GROW AND ADD ONE MORE DEATH TO YOUR FAILURE
COUNTER.”**

The ground around Tantabus’ enormous hooves withers and dies, leaving the rolling green grass as black mess. From it, black pony figures begin rising.

**“I WONDER IF I UNDERSTAND HOW YOU BUGS WORK A
LITTLE BETTER NOW.”**

No, not ponies. Changelings. An army of changelings grows out of the ground which starts trembling under their hooves as the black wave charges towards the duo.

“387, if you have something else left in your sleeve, now’s the time to use it,” 156 chuckles nervously as the horde approaches, “Because I’m pretty sure running isn’t an option anymore.”

“I don’t know what to do...” he breathes out, his voice still shaken from the vanished memory and his shoulders slumped.

“That’s an order from a higher rank, Twinkledink!” 156 pushes herself up, walks to his side, and smacks the back of his head, “Less moping, more fighting the giant star monster and its army of fake changelings.”

“Ow...” 387’s distant gaze finally focuses on 156, “Hey, wait, you saw-?”

“Giant. Star. Monster. Massive. Bug. Army,” 156 jabs 387 in the chest with every word.

“Oh, right,” his horn flashes, and a protective shimmering dome appears around the hill as the army surrounds them and reaches its base. Some fakes take flight and begin slamming against it from above, bringing back vivid memories of attacking Canterlot, “There. Protection done. Now you can think about how to destroy the fake changeling army as well as the giant nightmare monster.”

Tantabus laughs again.

“NO NO, I DON’T THINK SO.”

It’s massive hoof reaches over to the hill and gives the barrier a single tap. Cracks spread from the point of impact, and more and more glass-like shards start dropping from it as the fakes begin ramming their bodies violently against it.

“Strategy level of Chrysalis, seriously...” 387 sighs.

“You stay here and think, I deal with that,” with a flash of green, chitinous blades grow over 156’s body as she blasts herself through the air towards the first fake pushing its body head-first through the crack. She grabs it by its neck, steadies herself with her hind legs against the barrier, and rips its head off, leaving its body stuck in the hole like a cork, “Fighting like a warrior is so... barbaric, but damn if it isn’t cathartic!”

Cracks spread under the mass of the entire army slamming against the barrier from all sides on repeat.

“You said it yourself, 387 - you’ve got a pretty much endless supply of love here,” the warrior down on the ground mutters, “You’re not gonna run out, so just concentrate.”

The fake corking the hole gets popped out, letting through several slimmer changelings who immediately attack 156. Thanks to being linked up to 387 watching this from underneath, even them surrounding her means very little as she’s able to see the attacks coming through him.

387, as a warrior, notices their sloppy attacks immediately.

“Whatever Tantabus might think, if it had proper knowledge of the changeling mind this army would be acting far more coordinated. These are just bodies,” he mentally informs 156, fairly certain that such communication is safe.

This would be so much easier if I had at least two more pairs of eyes...

Unfortunately, being able to see any attack coming is still limited by the ability to react, and 156 is slowly getting overrun as she has to hunt fakes who, instead of attacking her, start flying straight at 387, thus giving time for others to crawl inside. However, instead of continuing towards 387, they turn around some distance away and swarm 156, now with numbers she can barely match.

“Good job catching them, but they’re not going after me. Tantabus wants me to see you die,” 387 grits his teeth.

“WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO GUESS THAT SOONER!” she yells back, bursting upwards while grabbing a fake above her and tossing it down at the growing swarm, *“These things might be weaker and slower than me but that doesn’t matter when there’s a thousand of them!”*

“Want to trade places? You and your infiltrator mind trying to bend reality against the most powerful entity inside a dimension you barely understand? Because I could definitely use some good old punching to clear my head.”

387 hears 156’s scream, because by now he can’t even be her second pair of eyes anymore due to the ball of fakes completely obscuring her. Hearing her pained voice, Tantabus’ grin only grows wider.

“AND SO, AS YOU MORTALS SAY, THAT’S HOW THE COOKIE CRUMBLES.”

387 feels reality shift, and as he looks with worry to the left where the air wobbles, forming a rift in space, a familiar, deep voice says:

“Yeah, no.”

559, his carapace scarred and scratched, walks through and throws a severed, brown mantis head of a dreamweaver on the ground. Behind him, 918 walks in, followed by the final two warriors of the second dreamscape group.

“And they say that the art of dynamic entry is dead,” she looks up at the mass of fakes now scattering to engage the new enemies and giving 156

some breathing room.

“What the holes took you so long?!” calls out 156, her aggressive call still dripping with relief.

“With all due respect, you try dealing with a dreambuilding monstrosity on your first trip into the dreamworld,” replies 918.

“LOOK OUTSIDE!” 156 yells back.

918 and the warriors look at the Tantabus.

“Retracted,” the second infiltrator breathes out, *“So that’s the big boss 559 was trying to sass?”*

“Yep,” is all 156 says before retreating from the growing swarm of fakes.

559, 791, and 2899 begin wiping the floor with the fakes with ease. Three warriors with the tactical and mental support of two infiltrators, all possessing unlimited stamina, are way too much for the slow pace through which the enemies can get through 387’s barrier.

“Good job, guys,” 387 breathes out a sigh of relief as the immediate danger vanishes with shocking ease.

“We’ve been fighting pony and changeling armies since we got here. Holes, I think we might have killed fake Chrysalis at some point, it kinda blends all together,” replies the scarred warrior, *“We know how to let loose with near-infinite love.”*

“I wouldn’t celebrate too early. Considering our combined mental power, Tantabus might not be able to kill us with a thought anymore nor affect us with illusions through the hive links, but it can still summon more monsters than ever.”

“Then how do we attack that huge grinning bastard directly?”

387 grins. He knows how arrogant, powerful beings act. After all, he’s survived through the rule of some of the worst.

“Hey, 559,” he calls out loud enough so that Tantabus hears him, “You want me to make a bigger hole in that shield? Looks to me like you’re running out of targets.”

**“SO COCKY! SUCH HOPE TURNS INTO FEAR FAR TOO EASILY
AS REALITY SETS IN!”**

To everyone’s surprise, Tantabus teleports away from their hill, reappearing in the middle of the valley and looking upwards.

**“LET’S SEE HOW LONG IT TAKES YOU TO REALIZE YOU
CANNOT STOP ME. THE DAMAGE TO THE REAL WORLD HAS
BEEN ENOUGH BY NOW.”**

Without any noise, a tear appears in the sky where Tantabus’ horn is pointing, followed by a female scream:

**“IT CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO ESCAPE! IT WILL TURN OUR
REALITY INTO ITS PLAYGROUND LIKE THE DREAMSCAPE!”**

“That sounded like the voice which guided us here,” reports 559,
“Orders?”

156, as the highest rank around, takes charge.

“The voice didn’t feel like a trap. 387, sync your warriors while 918 and I provide support. Don’t go into the front line yourself, though, we might need your dream bending mojo yet.”

387’s barrier vanishes at the same moment as the formation of four warriors and two infiltrators charges forward. With enough hive link nodes and good eyes, there’s no surprise attack the enemy swarm can make that wouldn’t be dodged or countered. The warriors quite literally rip and tear their way through the fakes within minutes, all the way while clearing the distance between the original hill and Tantabus’ leg.

“Something must be up,” 387 warns, *“Tantabus wouldn’t be ignoring us if it didn’t have a plan.”*

Then reality hits them. Right as they hit Tantabus.

As if laughing at them, the army of fakes creates some distance before vanishing entirely.

They strike Tantabus with all the force of their hooves, blades, and energy beams. Any full power attack they can muster. Focused attack on one spot, split attacks. Legs, torso, eyes, its horn.

Nothing leaves as much as a *dent* in the partially see-through but completely solid mass of stars and nebulae.

“ADORABLE.”

That brief look down is all Tantabus spares for them before looking up again, right into the slowly spreading rift.

“GET READY, CHANGELINGS!” the female voice calls out again.

**“DEAR LUNA, YOU FAILED EVERYONE. THE SOONER YOU
START WORKING ON COMING TO TERMS WITH IT, THE
SOONER IT WILL BE OVER.”**

“*Down there!*” 156 catches the first sign of air wobbling just like when 559’s group appeared, and all changelings rush through the air towards the hoof of Tantabus’ left foreleg.

The new portal spits out five drones like a shotgun.

“Wheee!”

“Ow ow ow ow ow, my head is starting to hurt again!”

“Yaaay, all the long words are coming back!”

“See how far I can boooounce!”

“Guys, DODGE!”

10013’s warning is, thankfully, unnecessary, as every single drone gets snatched by a warrior or an infiltrator and is immediately moving at speeds normally reserved for playing drone ball but without the pain.

“What’s going oooooooooon?!” 10013, having been ‘leading’ the dreamscape drones so far, does its best to focus on the suddenly rather blurry and windy situation.

“We’re currently engaged in a fight against-” 156 begins.

“WE DROP, YOU DIG THE BIG LEG!” 387 mentally yells over her.

“Awesome! Only one of those words had more than three letters! Much better for my head,” comments 47989.

“Yeah, being concise is crucial!” 13887 agrees.

“Neeerd- ow ow ow!” 31214 tries to stick its tongue out at the drone held by 2889 flying next to it and its holder, only managing to bite itself.

“Everything is still bluuuurryyyyyyy!” 19441 adds its two bits to the chaos

10013, being the second highest ranked drone overall and the top one here, distills the still rather incoherent situation into one, easy to understand command, and points at the gigantic starry pillar around which the changelings are circling:

“DIG BIG!”

Finally...

FINALLY...

The corner of 387’s mouth curls up as Tantabus screeches in what must be more shock than agony as the drone hooves start ripping chunks of ‘flesh’ from its leg.

“HOW?!”

Still, the drones are tiny while the sheer mass of the leg is enough to buy Tantabus a lot of time to think. And think it does.

The narrow rift in the sky stops spreading and stabilizes as Tantabus looks down, raises its leg, and stomps, creating a rumbling earthquake and scattering the drones into the air where they’re immediately scooped up by the other changelings again. The leg starts healing in front of their eyes, but

it's clear that Tantabus wasn't expecting to have to waste energy on doing so, and it's taking time.

As the warriors circle around for another drop, they notice more fake changelings sprouting from the ground, this time small and, in their eyes, rather slow.

"Is it trying to grow drones this time?" 387 chuckles, "I think it can see that they can break through anything."

"Will they be as strong as the fakes we fought until now?" asks 156.

"I doubt it. I think that without understanding a mind, it can't copy its essence. I don't know how to explain something I don't really understand myself, but if it could merge drone digging with our speed, reflexes, and hive link synchronization, we'd all be already dead," shoots 387, "It think it will be straight up a fight against a horde of drones."

"I WILL TURN YOUR POWER AGAINST YOU!"

"What power?" 31214 can't help asking, "We don't have any power."

**"DON'T PLAY INNOCENT, LITTLE BUG. A HORDE OF YOU
WILL BE UNSTOPPABLE!"**

"Us... like drones? Against a bunch of high ranks?" 19441 tries to wrap its head around a situation that makes zero sense.

"Are you right in the head, bad guy star pony?" 47989 scratches the scar on the back of its head, "I know it's hard to think sometimes when you get hit there a lot."

"YOUR MIND GAMES DON'T WORK ON ME!"

"Like, you summoned how many fake drones against six high ranks?" 10013 furrows its brows, "Are you crazy? You'd need at least three more zeroes to get even close."

"SHUT UP! THIS ARMY WILL BE ALL POWERFUL!"

“Your call,” 10013 shrugs and allows itself to be tossed against the previously dug gashes in Tantabus’ leg into which it now starts burrowing to avoid being dislodged again by another stomp. It doesn’t know why it’s digging, but it was told to dig... so it does, “Silly star pony. We don’t mess with high ranks.”

Outside of its hole, the situation is going as expected, at least as expected by the real drones. Thousands of uncoordinated drones against a bunch of mid and high rank changelings without the chance of wearing them out is a massacre. In the eyes of the high ranks, the reaction and speed difference is so massive that it almost looks as if the drones are moving through quicksand.

The question regarding why the ranks of drones sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands or more could never rise up despite any amount of abuse or mistreatment throughout the history of the changeling species is being answered right now.

387 sighs.

If only they all didn’t look as if they were enjoying it. But hey, I can always lie to myself and say they’re just happy for fighting an easier enemy than before.

Yeah. It’s that. For sure. Nothing else.

Soon, the drone army vanishes into thin air, as Tantabus must be realizing its mistake. It growls, looks down, and its horn lights up like the sun. In response, the previous changeling army starts growing out of the ground again, although this time in numbers straight up covering the ground and, as they take into the air, the sky.

“It’s not screwing around anymore, is it?” asks 156.

“The drones are causing damage, they’re just too slow about it,” 387 replies, “Sucks that we have to fight around the holes they dug in the leg or the fakes would just pull them out.”

559 swings a glowing foreleg downwards, the chitin blade growing out of it breaking after cleaving two fakes and getting stuck in a third.

They're getting smashed by almost a solid mass of bodies. If there's one good thing about the situation, it's that at least they can't get attacked from the back anymore, because they're being pushed so far that their backs are against Tantabus' leg.

Not exactly a prospect filling anyone with hope, but it's important to stay positive. Unfortunately, the only thing 387 is growing more and more positive about is that none of this is enough.

Solid mass pressing against his back with the only exception being the drone ingress hole, and fighting nine enemies with four legs in total. That's 387. Next to him, 559 is doing the same. All changelings are surrounding Tantabus' leg like a bracelet, all fighting side by side.

We can't avoid being wounded forever. Every lucky swing, the smallest scratch, or a dent in our armor is one step closer to...

...to the inevitable.

387 grits his teeth as a burning emerald blade of pure love bursts out of each of his hooves and cleaves several enemies in half at once.

Dig big, guys.

Dig big.

Finale: 2/3

Time loses all meaning when faced with the eternal battle, but eventually, 387's prayers are answered by a series of loud cracks from behind.

"SCATTER!" orders 156, "Drones, dig up and towards the center of the leg as quickly as you can now or you'll get crushed!"

The fighting changelings kick the nearest fakes away and cover their heads instead of attacking, before bursting through the wall of enemies just in time.

Tantabus' foreleg crumbles around the knee under its weight, making the titan stumble and fall down on the stump as its other foreleg fails to keep it upright.

"YOU..."

"Generic evil monologue is generic," mutters 387, flying through the cloud of dust raised by the Tantabus' fall to one knee. One foreleg knee, technically, since its hind legs are untouched.

"Drones?" 156 pings the hive links to check everyone's status due to zero visibility.

"We're all inside one big hole in the leg. We're a bit squished but alright!" reports 10013.

"Then start digging upwards. You're clearly doing damage!"

"More digging?"

"Yessss!"

"I was born for this!"

"We all were!"

"Don't steal my thunder!"

"I don't even know what that means and I feel insulted!"

156 stops listening to the bickering, because by now she knows they'll follow her orders no matter what. Now, all the high ranks have to do now is use the cover of dust to-

She doesn't know what hit her, and the feelings of chaos and panic coming from all the other links tell her she's not alone. It's... painfully similar to being blasted away by the explosion in Canterlot, down to the tumbling and spinning in the air. Thankfully, this time she has the love and presence of mind to stabilize herself in the suddenly clear air.

I must have been a shockwave originating from the Tantabus that's thrown them in all directions and cleared the dust cloud. The fakes are still flying away too, unable to recover as quickly and vanishing into thin air after reaching a certain distance.

Links... check. Everyone is alive and approaching.

“AAAAAAAARGH!”

From her position near the hill where she and 387 originally landed, she can see Tantabus point its horn at its 'droned' foreleg. A beam of light follows, cutting it off near the barrel like a laser, before telekinetically lobbing the way of the changelings regrouping towards her.

“What's going on?”

“What's happeniiiiiiing?!”

“I dunno which way's up anymore!”

“I'm gonna goop myself!”

“Blurrgh- I think I already did!”

“BRICK MODE, NOW!” 387's mental scream drowns everything else.

“Did he mean us?”

“I think so.”

“Hey, how does he know about brick mode?”

“I thought that was a secret!”

“Shut up and brick!” 10013 cuts the responses off.

The chunk of starry leg lands, leaving a deep groove in the ground. When it stops moving, it dissolves, leaving only drones dropping on the ground, each one curled up into the tightest ball it can.

One by one, they look up when all the movement seems to stop, ears perked.

“What? Why are we here? Weren’t we inside the Tanto thingy?”

“I think it tried to play drone ball with us.”

“Nah, we’re not hurt or missing any bits...”

“Or are we, huh?”

“No, we’re not. Are you?”

“No. I just wanted to sound smart.”

To 156, it doesn’t matter which drone is talking anymore or what they’re saying. It’s just a background noise to the overall combat situation. Unfortunately, despite Tantabus kneeling on one foreleg, the changelings are back where they started, and the army of fakes is growing between them and Tantabus again.

“You think they’ll let us approach while gloating about being invulnerable again?” asks 156 with a nervous chuckle.

Seeing the wall of fakes grow again, 387 shakes his head.

“Tantabus is learning. I can see the fakes layering behind each other. Even if we break through this time, we’ll immediately be inside a ball of enemies again.”

“CHANGELINGS!” they hear Luna again, “PREPARE YOURS-”

“SHUT UUUUUUP!”

“-AAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Despite Luna’s scream of pain, the air atop the hill shifts just like last time, and several more hive links connect to the changelings already present even

before 1988 appears, followed by 36658, 57999, 20100, Smiley, and finally 9999.

1988 looks around once the portal closes, his eyes immediately stopping on 9999.

“Where’s 17070?”

“I’ll explain everything later and report to the crusher on my own, but we might have a bigger problem than one missing drone!” 9999 reports chipperly while saluting and looking right past the infiltrator.

“Switch to hive links. Tantabus doesn’t seem to be able to hear us that way,” 387 instructs the newcomers.

“No drones bickering this time?” 156 raises an eyebrow.

“Nope, 156,” replies 9999, *“Everyone’s here to help the hive. Just say the word.”*

“1988, why is that drone reporting instead of you?” she turns her attention to the infiltrator.

“In your absence, I decided that it would be a good course of action to enlist the help of someone more familiar with drone behavior,” 1988 immediately adopts 9999’s tone of reply.

“And where is everyone else?!”

“Long story short - they’re probably okay but they won’t be coming.”

“BIGGER ISSUES HERE!” 387 yells over them, *“TANTABUS’ HORN IS GLOWING AGAIN!”*

Just as he interrupts them, a beam of purple light blasts upwards from Tantabus’ horn. The light splits, catching the edges of the rift in the sky, and resumes pulling them apart, slowly but steadily.

“That must be the Tantabus Luna wanted us to help stop,” 1988 narrows his eyes.

“No time to explain what’s- hey, how do you know?” 387 gives him a surprised glance.

“Princess Luna gave us the basic rundown of the situation. Supposedly, Tantabus is holding her imprisoned somewhere inside its body. If we can get her out, she might be able to help more directly. Not clue what the hole in the sky is.”

“It’s bad news, and the worst part is that only drones can harm Tantabus. Unfortunately, it knows that too and that army won’t let us get through them-”

“What about under them?” interrupts 9999. When all high ranks glare at it, it shrinks away, *“Sorry, sorry, sorry.”*

“I know I’m overstepping here, but if I may ask - let’s include 9999 in the decision process. It will make guiding the drones much easier and our orders will be better... translated into actions,” 1988 hooks the back of 9999’s neck with a jagged hook on his leg and pulls the drone towards itself.

“Orders are or-” 156 shoots 1988 a dirty glare.

“Underground then?” 387 talks over her. When she growls at him, he adds, *“156, I fully intend to get back to the hive and, since you saw my memories, Chrysalis will pull all this out of your head and execute me. So I have no problem saying that you should stop bringing up hierarchy because compared to me you know about as much about this world as the drones do.”*

156’s eye twitches and, in response, 387 boops her nose before snatching 9999, flying up, and blasting straight towards the wall of enemies:

“Everyone grab some drones and follow me. We’re going on a bombing run!”

Despite everything that was said, every single changeling looks at 156 visibly steaming. Nostrils flared, she barks-

“You heard 387. What are you waiting for?!”

-and in the next second she’s flying over 36658 and 57999, grabbing one with each foreleg, and following 387.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!” both rapidly accelerating drones scream, and are quickly joined by the others who get immediately grabbed by the remaining high ranks.

“How quickly can you get to Tantabus if we drop you in front of the army and start digging into it?” asks 387, shaking wide-eyed 9999 to get its attention.

“Is that normal soil?” asks 9999.

“The holes would I know?” 387 rolls his eyes.

“Had to be!” replies 10013, *“Landing in it was super smooth.”*

“30 seconds at most then,” assesses 9999 quickly.

“Then we need you to burst out directly under Tantabus, fly up, and start digging through its barrel. We don’t know where Luna is, but since it separated its own leg to get rid of us without an issue I’d be guessing she’ll be in its barrel or head. You have to create a singular access point that we’ll be able to defend against this amount of enemies. We still have some aces up our holes we can use to get through this wall of fakes, but if those don’t work, we’ll have to face a fresh army and I’m getting the feeling that those fakes will be able to use the new tricks we’ll have shown them. And then we’ll all die,” 387 transmits to everyone, *“So... no pressure.”*

To it, 9999 genuinely laughs, making 387 look down at it.

“Did you hear the news, guys? If we don’t do what we’re told we’ll all die,” the drone transmits.

With that, the drones get lobbed at the ground while the high ranks slam into the first wall of enemies, laughing all the way down.

“Alright, everyone,” orders 387, “Keep the enemy engaged until one of the infiltrators sees the drones surface. Don’t press too much forward, and get your full-body shapeshifting horseshoes on. It’s gonna be a wild ride.”

Despite the already extremely extended battle, the bodies of changelings are working at peak capacity due to the almost nonexistent love drain. As for the worm of doubt wiggling its way through even the most steeled mind when repeatedly faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, that worm is dead, floating in the bottle of liquor marked “Orders from a higher rank”.

Thankfully, it seems that Tantabus is now fully focusing on spreading the sky rift, and the fakes aren’t particularly smart, so when the drones burst out of the ground at the same time and start flying upwards towards Tantabus’ belly, there’s no resistance.

“DRONES ARE IN THE AIR!” reports 156, spinning around in the air, her leg-blades hacking through the neck chitin of four changelings at the same time.

“...everywhere I look around...” muses 387 for the briefest fraction of a second before yelling out loud, “NOW!”

After the real changelings being completely silent for so long, the fakes give them a second of breathing room after 387’s scream, steeling themselves against any potential super attack the changelings are about to unleash.

They’re not ready for the green flash of transformation, and the love-fueled, tiny insects rocketing between them, through the holes in their legs, faster than they can react. In less than three seconds, the changelings have burst through multiple layers of the army and the reserves, transformed into themselves again in hope that Tantabus won’t be able to completely identify what happened in a blink of an eye and imitate it, and are blasting their way through the dramatically thinner ranks behind the main wall.

9999 lands on the bottom of Tantabus' belly, the closest point to where they surfaced, and leads the way up like a drill.

"We need to make the tunnel wide enough for the others!" it says. Behind it, 10013, 36658, and 20100 form a triangle, expanding the hole immediately. Everyone else widens it so that roughly two warriors will be able to fit in, *"Upwards and hard right! Should be the way towards the head."*

"Is that where the soup pony is?"

"No idea!"

A moment later, the drones hear the buzzing of wings inside the starry yet somehow fleshy tunnel.

"KEEP DIGGING!" calls out 387, rushing in first, closely followed by 156, *"559, 791, shield wall!"*

The two warriors in the back, side by side, each rip off a chunk of chitin from the side of their barrel and glue it to one foreleg each like a shield while their barrels regenerate. A long, sharp stick grows on the other side, which they hook into their leg hole and start thrusting into the incoming enemies.

So far so good. With the numbers advantage negated by the enclosed space and Tantabus seemingly unwilling to get itself ripped up by its own creations in order to give them more access paths, the changelings are inside its barrel and, at least for now, marginally safe.

Now to find Luna.

"We need to split up, but the moment we do, we'll lose the option to swap out 559 or 791 if they get too hurt to fight without a chance to immediately regenerate," 387 grits teeth, *"On the other hole, if we start worming around in one group and one tunnel, Tantabus might be able to move Luna around us somehow while figuring out a way to stop us."*

“There’s ten of us,” 9999 looks around at the drones surrounding it, “We can cover a lot of ground if we dig tunnels of only our size. But that would mean you’d be stuck here and we wouldn’t have your eyes to see what’s behind us like outside.”

“I’m not big on any last stands,” 387 sighs, “But I’m out of ideas. I don’t know if we can cause enough damage to Tantabus to stop it, so we have to rely on Luna’s knowledge to get out of the dreamscape. It’s strange that Tantabus is locked into a physical form, but I guess it’s the only way to suppress Luna enough, because she hasn’t been able to even talk to us since bringing 1988’s group here. I’m not letting you get ambushed, though. Drones will at least go in pairs. It’ll slow us down but you’re of no use if you get picked off by something. Everyone else, Hot Gates!”

What am I saying? No one here knows any history...

“YEAH, HOT CAKES!” cheers 36658 and dives into a wall, followed by 57999.

“We get cakes for this?” gasps 13887.

“387 just said so!” 10013 confirms, which is followed by the usual chaos:

“Wooo, cakes!”

“What’s cake?”

“No idea. The hive mind just keeps repeating it’s made with love.”

“Yay, love!”

“Let’s go, Smiley,” 9999 continues in the headwards direction of the original tunnel, followed by the Silent, “You go ahead, I’ll collapse the tunnel behind us.”

“Smiley?” 156 frowns.

“Is that really a question you want to ask now?” 1988 looks at her, before adding a much less polite, “With all due respect to hive hierarchy and all that nonsense.”

156 returns an exhausted glare before turning around.

“918, 1988, we’re on hive link support. The better we can make our warriors’ reflexes, the less we’ll have to fight ourselves. 387, we’re in the belly of the beast now. Tactical leadership is yours.”

“Oooh, shiny!” mumbles 9999 to itself as the starry-fleshy wall in front of it turns into some sort of crystal in an attempt to prevent it from digging further to no avail, “Anything on your side, Smiley?”

The Silent tilts its head as 9999 glances its way.

“Right, right. Difficult questions won’t get us anywhere,” 9999 reaches back through the narrow tunnel it’s crawling through to pat Smiley’s head.

Nuzzle!

“Awww,” it pulls away from the Silent rubbing its nose against the tiny hoof, “I like you too, buddy.”

The current drone strategy is - one member of the duo is digging straight forward while the other one is watching their back and widening the tunnel in case they have to retreat. So far, nothing much has happened. The constant reports of other drones and chatter of the high ranks defending their position blend together in the back of 9999’s head, and it falls into the familiar yet somehow incredibly distant digging rhythm of times back home.

Despite all the incredibly good things that happened, 9999 must admit it missed this.

Dig forward, wipe the residue away with the other hoof, push itself forward with its hind legs, pause, listen for any evil gribblers woken up by its progress, repeat.

“I can sense you!” 9999 hears a weak, female voice.

“Smiley, did you hear that too?” it asks.

Nod nod nod!

“Any idea where it came from? Just looking for confirmation here.”

As 9999 looks at Smiley, the Silent returns the look with a puzzled expression.

“Goop,” curses 9999, “Too difficult of a question again? Okay. Point where you heard the voice from.”

Smiley jabs its hoof into the wall to the left.

“Yep, thought so too. Let’s go!” 9999 leads the way.

Shortly after, 9999’s hoof breaks through Tantabus’ insides into an open area. No drone is stupid enough to stick a head through a hole into an unknown space, so it widens the hole a little to see inside from its crawlspace.

The soup pony whom 1988 called Luna is tied up inside a root-like structure originating from the floor and the ceiling, her horn glowing and presumably forming a tight cocoon of blue energy preventing the roots from tightening around her.

“Smiley, stay here!” orders 9999, *“Everyone, I think we have the soup princess,”* it broadcasts the image in front of its eyes, *“Sending my coordinates.”*

The moment it transmits its location, all the other drones respond with their relative ones and begin converging towards 9999 who pulls itself through the widened hole into the small, smooth cave of starry flesh. For a normal creature, the “floor” formed of blackness of space, nebulae, and distant stars would be difficult to walk on due to instinctive impossibility of measuring distances, but to a changeling this looks quite similar to the hive mind “waiting room” in which they’re far too used to moving.

9999 reaches the first roots and severs them with ease.

More grow in their place almost immediately.

“Okay, this might take more of us at the same time.”

It doesn’t stop, though, and despite the regeneration it keeps making slow but steady progress.

That is, until it swings its hoof and the root splashes away like mud instead of providing *any* resistance, making 9999 stumble in surprise.

**“I HAD IT ALL WRONG. TRYING TO RESIST YOUR POWER IS
A WASTE OF ENERGY.”**

The ceiling turns gooey and starts dripping down in massive chunks, slowly filling up the empty space.

**“ALL I HAVE TO DO IS OUT-REGENERATE YOU, TINY
INSECTS.”**

“Whatever you just did is working,” calls out 357, “Over half of the fakes vanished into thin air just now. 559 and 791 are pushing the survivors back into the hole. Keep going!”

With a sucking noise, a hole opens in the other end of the filling up area, and the roots drag Luna away.

“Guys, we’ve got a problem!” reports 10013, “The walls are suddenly healing up faster than I can dig them!”

“Same here!” says 13887, “It’s super easy now, but it’s just splooshing more and more back every time I dig a chunk.”

“SMILEY, RUN!” yells 9999, rushing back towards the tunnel they’ve been digging.

The received visuals are the same from everyone. No matter what they do, the tunnel they dug keeps on refilling, forcing them to retreat with increasing speed or be swallowed by the starry quicksand- flesh- interstellar darkness.

Unlike the others, thanks to 1988's eye enhancement, 9999's reaction times are much better and it can notice critical details as it dashes back towards the hole.

"The tunnel that opened and sucked Luna inside went that way!" it maps out the expected route and transmits it to the others, *"Plus, it seems that these holes we dug regenerate faster from the furthest end!"* It looks up at the slowly dripping ceiling while moving as quickly as possible away from the bulging matter quickly catching up, *"If we group up, we might be able to out-dig the recovery!"*

All this takes less than three seconds, and 9999 is almost at the hole. It just needs one final push-

Smiley reaches for 9999's foreleg just as the stars swallow it. The Silent pulls and, for a second, it feels as if the soft flesh is giving in, before-

Crunch

-it tumbles backwards with a broken off fetlock held in its foreleg.

"...eeehhh..." it whines quietly. Silents are made to be looked through by high ranks unwilling to get into a critically dangerous situation and to follow simple orders. They're not made to talk or convey ideas on their own.

With no recourse other than to start quickly crawling away from the approaching wall of flesh with 9999's dripping fetlock in its mouth, Smiley flees until it feels minds touching its own.

"Where's 9999? I can't reach it."

Frowny face.

"High Score? High Score?!"

Sad face.

"9999?!"

Wibbling face.

1988 is the first one to sense the sudden panic from the drones, or maybe he's just the first one to care.

"9999?!" he scans the hive links and finds one completely beyond reach,
"Silent, where is 9999?"

Crying face.

1988 briefly replays Smiley's most recent memories before breathing out,
"Fuck..."

**"FINALLY, I CAN SENSE YOUR DELICIOUS DESPAIR! IF I
KNEW THIS ONE WAS SO IMPORTANT, I WOULD HAVE
KILLED IT IMMEDIATELY. AND NO, YOUR REVIVAL TRICK
WON'T WORK AGAIN. WE'RE ALL LEARNING HERE."**

Finale 3/3

“What’s going on?” asks 387, finally sensing a note of grief because it’s coming from 1988.

“Tantabus killed High- 9999 after it made contact with Luna,” reports 1988, “And drones can’t deal with the sheer mass of regenerating flesh. We have the vector in which Luna was moved, but no way of getting to her.”

387 grits his teeth.

“Alright, remaining here will only get us crushed then, but Tantabus is now vulnerable until it decides to make itself indestructible again. So far, these changes in strategy always took some time. Based on the last known direction of the tunnel I’m getting, Luna must be somewhere in the front part of its chest, so if we get out and fly around we might close on her depending on how easy it is to move her. 559, can you hold the tunnel on your own for a moment?”

“On it!” the warrior’s chitin spear breaks and gets immediately replaced by another one while 791 backs off to 387.

“Everyone, blast the floor!” orders 387 and points his horn down.

In mere seconds, chunks of surface under their hooves start disintegrating.

“MAKE WAY, FALLING THROUGH!” yells 10013, dropping from the ceiling and immediately digging downwards. The other drones start arriving from their crawl spaces which quickly close behind them.

The regeneration isn’t enough to withstand the combined blasting and digging, and the changelings soon see real light again as they fly out of Tantabus’ belly, the hole they created rapidly closing behind them. Unfortunately, the ground seems far further down than it was when they dug in.

The drastically reduced number of fake changelings poses no problem, but when the real lings fly out from under Tantabus' shadow and look up, 387 curses yet again.

The rift is wide open. Tantabus' previously broken off leg is back in full, and the monster itself is almost touching the sky with its horn while wearing a wide smile. The front of its chest is now see-through like glass, revealing Luna stuck in the root-like structure and forced to look up by having her mane pulled backwards. It's clearly just taunting them now.

“CONGRATULATIONS, BUGS. YOU PRESERVED THE SECRETS OF YOUR MIND, BUT I’M ALMOST IN THE REAL WORLD. WITH SO MANY PONY MINDS TO SPREAD INTO, I WILL NEVER BE CHAINED AGAIN! LOOK UP, LUNA, AND SEE THAT YOU FAILED!”

“BLAST IT!” orders 387, kicking a fake charging at him in the face while shooting green lasers from his horn at Luna's prison. As chunks of Tantabus' chest start evaporating under the changeling fire, the titanic equine laughs.

“NICE TRY, BUT TOO LATE. DO YOU WANT A PLAY BY PLAY? THE RIFT IS BIG ENOUGH, AND THE MOMENT I TOUCH IT I WILL ENTER THE MINDS OF MORTALS. THE DREAMWEAVERS WILL DEVOUR YOU AND LUNA-”

“YESSSS! IT WORKED! IT FINALLY WORKED!” yells a squeaky voice from the rift, *“Why did it work now? Nevermind, focus, dummy. BLUE, NOT-BLUE, HERE WE GOOOOO!”*

“...WHAT?”

The starry night-ness of Tantabus' horn connects to the blinding whiteness of the open rift-

No... to the blinding whiteness of some other massive entity coming through the rift.

Tantabus backs off, forced to dodge a dropping object of its own size followed by a slightly smaller, darker one.

Unprompted, changelings fly upwards to avoid another cloud of dust raised by the landing, only to hear a loud, somewhat feminine, robotic voice say:

“FIRING MAIN CANNON!”

A burning beam of red light, thick as a train, cleaves through the dust and blasts Tantabus’ chest. Its agonized roar follows and it responds by lowering its horn and blasting a beam of energy at the shadow outline of the obscured two enemies.

“AUXILIARY BARRIERS PRIMED FOR RELEASE!” announces a different robotic voice.

Tantabus’ attack vanishes as a teal barrier flickers into existence right before it hits, and the shockwave from the impact clears the air.

“I think I’ve gone insane from pressure and I’m hallucinating...” mutters 387.

In front of Tantabus leaning down after the original attack stands an equally massive plush toy of Princess Celestia, accompanied by one of Luna which is roughly a quarter of its size but still huge.

The craziest part, however, is the changeling drone wearing a cardboard Nightguard helmet standing on huge Celestia’s head, its legs gooped to the fuzz so that it doesn’t fall off.

“...WHAT?”

“In the name of the Nightguard, I ARREST YOU, EVILDOER!”

“...WHAAAA?!”

“Not-Blue, fire the Luna-saving beam!”

“IF YOU HIT ME, YOU WILL BURN HER!”

“Pfff, it’s a Luna-saving, not Luna-hurting beam. I’d never hurt Luna!”

In the mind of 65536, that is the absolute truth. There’s no doubt about it, no second thought, nothing, just like the fact that drones can dig through anything, that changelings have infinite stamina if they have the love, or that high ranks can kill any amount of drones on a whim.

Here, in the dreamscape, true belief is only barely distinguishable from the truth, and a mind too simple to understand any evidence to the contrary is a force to be reckoned with.

“FIRING MAIN CANNON!” announces Not-Blue.

“PRIMARY OFFENSIVE SYSTEM ENGAGED!” says Blue in sync.

The twin eye beams bite into Tantabus’ chest, sending the titan tumbling backwards. However, this time a comparatively small, dark blue dot remains in the air for a moment before it starts dropping to the ground.

“NO...”

“Hey, that’s the soup princess!” 10013 calls out, charging forward.

Within a moment, it’s overtaken by 1988 who in turn is left behind 387 who-

“ENGAGING TRACTOR BEAM!”

-avoids the beam of white light shooting from giant plush Celestia’s eyes, enveloping Luna, and gently pulling it up on the plushie’s head.

“LunaLunaLunaLuna!” 65536 tries to rush forward, forgets its legs are glued to the surface, and faceplants into the plush fuzz, “Mmmphm- nom nom nom!” it bites the goop off as if nothing happened and starts shaking the princess, “LunaLunaLunaLunaLu-!”

“HAH!” with a gasp, she wakes up, sits, and starts turning her head, “65536?! What? I was-” her eyes lock on Tantabus on the ground with a massive hole in its chest, “Stay here until I say otherwise!”

“But I got my armor and all,” 65536 objects, “Not the real one cuz I’m off duty, but-”

“What did I just say?” she gives it a... *look*.

“I’m not moving from this spot!” 65536 salutes, “Gooping my legs down again right now!”

“Good.”

Luna takes off, landing in front of Tantabus with her horn glowing. She doesn’t say anything, but the star monster begins shrinking in front of everyone’s eyes until it vanishes completely. Along with it, the sky fixes itself as well. A bit anticlimactic, really, but the important job was done by others already.

You are my darkness, and I must do better to contain you.

Luna takes a deep breath and calls out:

“CHANGELINGS, COME HERE! DO NOT WORRY. YOU TOO, 65536.”

Of course, everyone but 387 looks to 156 for confirmation. When she nods, the formation lands in front of Luna. 156 and 387 first, the other ranked changelings fanned out behind them, and the drones huddled up in a group a few steps away, seemingly not particularly interested in what’s going on.

To Luna, thanks to her experience with 65536, that seems *extremely* strange. She was expecting to be swarmed by them, but it might just be the presence of the higher ranks that’s tempering their curiosity. However, there are other issues to deal with first.

She gives 387 a puzzled look.

“The shape of your mind is something I haven’t felt in a very long time.”

“That’s neither here nor there,” 387 shakes his head, “So, what happens now? We’re still enemies... officially.”

“We don’t have to be,” Luna looks to the side where 65536 is galloping through the grass with a small plushie of Luna fastened to the back of its neck and dragging an almost life-sized Celestia plush by a foreleg held in its mouth, “I’ve learned a lot about you in the past weeks from 65536 here. I have no problem with helping any and all of you assimilate into pony society if you truly want to-”

“No,” 156 shakes her head.

“No,” 387 sighs despite agreeing, “Although probably for a distinctly different reason. What now, 156? And think before you answer, because if the answer is wrong I’ll have to assume I was wrong about you all this time and I’ll bury you here.”

The ranked changelings gasp while the drones still just... ignore everything, huddled up against each other.

“I guess that level of paranoia was what allowed you to survive this long,” 156 chuckles, “So let me guess - you want everyone here to decide for themselves, right? Well, why should I care if we leave a few drones or low ranks here? All it means is fewer mouths to feed,” she looks around, “Anyone here wants to go live in pony land?”

“Ahem,” 387 clears his throat, turning towards the others, “As 156 and Princess Luna said, we don’t know how much we can trust the ponies-”

“We totally can!” 65536 drops Not-Blue and hops up and down excitedly, “I mean, not everyone, but they can be super nice! Like, Sharp is nice, Princess Sunbutt is nice, Luna is the best, and the baddies only tried to kill me once in three weeks. That’s like... a record compared to back home!” it looks at the crestfallen drones, “Umm, guys... what’s wrong?”

The drones fan out, revealing a blankly staring Smiley still holding a broken fetlock in its mouth, tears streaming from its eyes.

“HIGH SCORE IS DEEEEEEEEEAAAAD!” weeps 36658. As if the words finally let the harsh reality in, the other drones start wailing.

“Drones-” 387 speaks out, but 1988 raises his hoof and clears his throat.

“May I?”

The warrior raises an eyebrow but nods.

“Drones!” 1988 looks into the numerous pairs of grieving eyes that look at him in response, “9999- High Score died gaining vital information that saved us all. Without it, we wouldn’t have bought enough time for... whatever the holes just happened. It saved the soup princess, and it saved us high ranks. Your high score isn’t just a concept anymore, something to motivate you to go through a life that... frankly... no one deserves. 9999 IS High Score now, the true Shiny Bringer. No matter what rank any other drone achieves, there will always be only one hero who sacrificed itself to save everyone. Don’t forget.”

“Y-Yeah...” 36658 nods, nudging 57999 sitting next to it, “Shiny Bringer made it so that the ponies wouldn’t eat us on sight!”

“And it taught the tiny buzzers how to spread shinies all over the forest!” 20100 looks up.

“It even held the hive mind together when I was incapacitated,” 1988 adds with a soft smile.

“Ahem!” 387 walks over, his mere presence quashing any already fragile enthusiasm, “Drones, you know how last time one of you died to Tantabus’ tricks, right?”

The drones who survived the first Tantabus’ trap look at 13887 who shivers. 387 continues:

“And you know what? It only took a few minutes for 13887 to come back. So what does it matter what Tantabus said? 9999 will come back, it’ll just take *much longer* this time. After all, a cleanly snapped neck is much different from being crushed by a ‘super powerful evil bad guy’.”

“R-RIGHT!” 10013 jumps up, “If it took 13887 a few minutes from such a quick and painless death, then even someone as awesome as 9999 might take... days to get back from this. Months. Years.”

“Yeah, tens of years!” 20100 nods vigorously, “But it’ll be back *for sure!*”

“Maybe hundreds!” 13887 agrees, “But that just means we gotta tell everyone back home to not forget how 9999 saved me from slashy spitters when I accidentally fell into a hole.”

1988 exchanges glances with 387. They both know none of the drones will live that long, but they also know it doesn’t matter.

387 stomps his hoof, making the drones go silent again.

“Here, however, you have a choice. A free choice. No one will force you to do anything. Luna-”

“*Soup princess!*” 1988 mentally corrects him.

“-Luna, the soup princess, is offering you a chance to go live with ponies, and 65536 is saying it is far less dangerous than your life back home. No one will go after you, no one will follow you, and that goes for everyone here, not just you drones. I’m going back, though.”

“I... have a feeling that my sister would be happy to see you,” Luna gives it another shot.

387 shakes his head without looking at her.

“My place is with the hive, no matter who is in charge, and no matter where that path takes me. I know I’m likely to be the first one on the chopping block when we get back, but if there’s any miniscule chance that I’ll live then I must be there to help anyone I can.”

“Then why did you lie to the little ones?” Luna’s voice grows harsher.

All higher changelings look at her with sudden frowns as 387 finally turns to face her. However, it’s the drones who group up in front of her and look

up, a bunch of big teal circles on black background.

“What do you mean, soup pony princess?” asks 10013.

“Tantabus wasn’t lying,” she replies, and a small part of her dies when she sees them all wince, including 65536, “It can manipulate this place almost as well as I can. It pains me to say it, but this... High Score whom you all so clearly adored... is gone, and I can’t let those two,” she nods to 387 and 1988, “sweet talk you into returning to your short and brutal lives back at the hive, at least not with lies.”

“Princess-” 387 hisses through gritted teeth.

“Oh, is that all?” replies 36658, seemingly relieved for no reason Luna can identify.

“Uhh, yes?” she tilts her head and, from the corner of her eye, she notices that 387 is about as surprised as she is.

“Then thanks, soup princess!” 36658 looks around, “You clearly care, and we’re all happy that 65536 landed with you, but you just don’t know High Score like we do.”

“Yeah!” 20100 nods with vigor, “High Score talked a high rank into healing us instead of eating us. A drone who can do that can do *anything*.”

“High Score once played with fire. And won!” 19441 blurts out.

“Totally,” 10013 beams, “We just gotta be patient. High Score will come back, and it’s up to us to tell every drone that wasn’t lucky enough to meet it about all the shinies it brought and all the awesome things it did.”

“Yup,” 57999 jabs Smiley, “And we even got a guy whom High Score saved in its final moments! Smiley here is Shiny-touched! We gotta go home and tell *everyone*!”

Smiley keeps looking down at the grass, but its foreleg shimmers, and it *digs* a few simple lines in the ground - a smiling face.

“Even Smiley thinks so, and that guy wasn’t made to think at all!” 31214 taps at the Silent’s temple, “See? No hollow sound. High Score made a Silent think a bit, and not even the Queen herself could do that!”

“So, don’t worry, soup princess,” 36658 finishes with a wide smile, “We just gotta go back and tell everyone that High Score the Shiny Bringer is with them, no matter what sort of muncher they’re running away from or how deep they’re supposed to dig.”

Luna wipes her eyes, fully aware this means that 65536 will never see any of them again.

“So, nopony is coming with me then?” she asks. When no one but 65536 nods, she adds, “I guess you’ll be your High Score’s apostles then.”

“Yeah, apostates!” 10013 nods, “Whatever that is.”

“That’s a vastly different expr-” Luna makes the beginner mistake of trying to correct a drone.

“WE’RE SHINY BRINGER’S POTATOES!” 36658 cheers, turns around, and hugs Smiley, much to the joining cheering of all other drones.

387 approaches Luna, once again at ease.

“I believe that’s settled then,” he says. She frowns at him, “Princess, if even one of them lives once we get back, it’ll tell *everyone* about this. Well, *some version* of what happened. The newly hatched drones might get to know that ponies are real, not just a record in the hive mind, and that they aren’t food or hunters waiting to kill them on sight. In the long run, that might do more good than just living out their natural lifetime as a group with you. As for whatever weird faith 1988 came up with, we’ll have to make sure the queen never learns about it, because she’s supposed to be the only... *deity* of the hive.”

“There’s a vast difference between belief and reality, and they’re being sold the former in order to remain obedient workers.”

“Is that the case?” 387 tilts his head, “They’ve never met the queen before the invasion. Holes, *most* changelings haven’t. She’s no less a rumor than whatever they believe about 9999. A stronger changeling tells you what to do, or a marker appears in the hive mind, that’s how things work.”

“That’s horrible...”

387 frowns while glancing sideways at 156.

“Yes, it is. That’s why I- they- we can’t run away and leave everyone else in that grim, black pit of ignorance.”

“Umm, 387?” a muffled squeak interrupts the conversation. The warrior looks at 65536 reaching up to him, holding Blue in its forelegs.

“What is it?”

“I heard what you said and... can you bring Blue here to the hive and give it to the guys? So that they’ll have something to remind them that ponies are nice and warm and fluffy. I’d give it to them but I know that someone would immediately take it.”

387 nods towards 156 who gives him a blank stare.

“Ask her. She’s the top rank here, or will be again once we’re out of the dreamscape.”

65536 turns towards her, Blue still presented in its outstretched forelegs. With a sigh. 156 takes it.

“If you think the first thing the queen does when we get back will be anything other than reading my mind and disintegrating this thing then you’re even dumb-”

Wibble!

“-FINE! Stop doing that! I’ll toss it to the first drone I see back home,” she looks away while swiping the plush toy.

“Thank you!” 65536 nuzzles her other foreleg.

“Yeah yeah, drone,” 156 coughs, and the hive link pulse she sends draws everyone’s attention, “Unless there’s anything else, we’re leaving. Princess, how does this go?”

“I can transport you nearly anywhere, provided I know the location.”

“Anywhere on the eastern edge of the Everfree Forest will suffice, then. We can find our way from there.”

“As you wish,” Luna nods, and a swirling portal appears in the air, “Good luck, changelings. I wish something good springs out of all that happened.”

“Drones, move in!” 156 orders.

“Byyyye, 65536! Bye, soup princess!” they wave before recklessly charging forward in a single file led by 10013, “INTO THE SWIRLY!”

EPILOGUE

Months have passed since the invasion of Canterlot.

On the 9th level of the hive, inside the 9th tunnel of the 9th sector, there are many cracks and small branching paths where drones once had to recover a chunk from a vein of minerals. However, the 9th crack is different - much smoother and looking more like a tunnel through which only a drone could comfortably crawl through.

It’s still only a short tunnel, though. No drone has the time to spare on pointless crawling outside of sleepy time. Doing so during worky time is obviously completely out of the question. Beyond it lies a small cave with smooth walls, comfortably only big enough for roughly six or seven drones. In its center stands a statue made of stone perfectly depicting a changeling drone indistinguishable from any other. Or it probably used to when it was originally carved from solid stone. Now, there are shards of obsidian glass

from the deepest tunnels gooped to its carapace, one eye has been replaced with a smooth sapphire a drone must have snatched from a particularly lucky mining operation and gotten away with due to a high rank's oversight. Finally, a dark blue plush pony sits on its back, constantly radiating a tiny amount of love for no discernable reason.

A drone is lying next to the statue, crushed pieces of its hind leg held together using a cast made from goop. Such a wound would normally mean the drone would have been devoured for any scrap of love, but this one is, despite its circumstances, still breathing.

There's one more changeling in the small cave, a warrior, resting with his back against the wall.

387 senses the presence of a changeling, and opens his eyes to see a drone creeping out of the entry hole. He smiles a bitter smile when he realizes the drone made no noise while getting inside, not even the faintest scratching of chitin on stone. An ingress on the level of the best of infiltrators including barely the faintest hive mind presence. Only a select few would have the mental skill to even notice it.

A quick hive link scan confirms his worries.

"I guess you finally made time to read through everyone's memories in full," he says.

The drone slowly looks around before transforming into a much taller, terrifying shape.

"Yes, I did, *Twinkleshine*," replies Chrysalis.

"Took you much longer than I thought it would, you know?" 387 stands up before lowering himself into a fighting stance.

The queen lets out a snort of contempt before giving the unconscious drone a quick glance.

"I feel rather insulted that you think it might work."

“All I can do is try,” 387 smirks.

Chrysalis rolls her eyes before reaching under her wing and pulling out a chunk of crystallized goo so tightly packed with love that it’s barely radiating at all. Her horn lights up, telekinetically bringing the Luna plush toy to her and unraveling stitches on its underbelly. From the opened hole, a weak, almost empty love crystal falls out which she replaces with the fresh one before fastening the stitches again and placing the toy back behind the statue’s neck.

“Tell me, which queen was your favorite?” she asks, transforming back into a drone.

“I’ve only known a king, Chrysalis. After him,” 387 shrugs, “my only concern was those on the bottom, not the one on top.”

“Heh, I suppose we all have our own cycles to break,” Chrysalis vanishes back into the hole, “Warrior 387?”

“Yes?”

“Arrange a sapphire mining operation in sector -xgg487g4663- and make sure at least eighty-five percent of all valuables get to the storage. That statue is *physically grating* to look at.”

387 looks at the sleeping drone.

Welp, you just missed possibly your only chance to see the queen, little guy.

As if sensing his attention, the drone shifts in its sleep, mumbling:

“...shinyyy...”

Author's Notes:

And that's it. Over a year of work on something that was supposed to be a 4funsies mucking around with drones, no plot, barely any lore,

and total random nonsense. Then the writing nation attacked, the whole thing took an arrow to the knee, and the writer was executed for making terrible references. What is it now? A much clearer outline of changeling history than anything I hinted at before, the change in Chrysalis' state of mind leading up to the tentative peace between changelings and ponies in the final chapters of Imbalanced, a baseline for up to now practically nonexistent changeling culture, and I even shoved a mention of Fury in there.

Anyway, as always, thanks for reading. As for what's next, I outlined some ideas in my end-of-year blog post, but I haven't moved onto anything yet, so... big shrug?

Damn it, even if it was more drones, I hate making cover arts, even as simple as the pixely stuff I made for this one.



They're EVERYWHERE!

